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UNDER THE CANNIBAL CURSE

By the same Author

I LIVED WITH GORILLA

JEUAN DU BERRIE WITH A PAIR OF FITCHEWS

UNDER
THE CANNIBAL CURSE

By
JEUAN DU BERRIE, M.B., A.M.T., F.Z.S.

With twelve half-tone Illustrations

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I.	The Two Chimpanzees	9
II.	The Big Top	20
III.	The Mystery of the Dried Head	36
IV.	The Lure of Africa	50
V.	In the Clutch of the Cannibals	60
VI.	Through the Forest	72
VII.	A Gruesome Banquet	82
VIII.	The Curse of the Cannibals	96
IX.	Jungle Wanderers	108
X.	The Story of the Dried Heads	126
XI.	In Search of the Lost Tribe	142
XII.	The End of the Search	157
XIII.	The Mysterious Lost Tribe	169
XIV.	Chilya	182
XV.	A Forest Idyll	196
XVI.	The Hunt	209
XVII.	The Curse Falls	221
XVIII.	The End of it All	236

707

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

JEUAN DU BERRIE WITH A PAIR OF FITCHEWS	*Frontispiece*
	FACING PAGE
SHOOTING THE RAPIDS, RIVER CONGO	32
'WIDE, ROLLING PLAINS, WITH MILES OF SOFT GRASS RELIEVED HERE AND THERE BY A BAOBAB TREE	32
JEUAN DU BERRIE	33
THE AUTHOR IN ARAB COSTUME	33
THROUGH THE GRASSLAND	112
NATIVES CARRYING AN IVORY TUSK	112
'SOMETIMES . . . WE SAW HERDS OF ELEPHANTS MIGRATING'	113
TYPICAL SUDANESE ARABS	192
'THEY TOOK THEIR WIVES AND CHILDREN AND SET OFF ACROSS THE DESERT'	192
ARAB TRIBESMAN FROM THE LOWER SUDAN	193
ARABIAN BEAUTIES FROM THE SUDAN	193

UNDER THE CANNIBAL CURSE

CHAPTER ONE

THE TWO CHIMPANZEES

IT was such a little cage, with wooden sides and thick black bars that let scarcely one ray of sunlight into the musty interior. For a moment, coming in from the brightness outside, I was blinded and could see nothing, only my nostrils twitched at a familiar smell. Then my eyes grew accustomed to the gloom and I peered through the bars of the cage.

Inside, huddled forlornly together, their eyes blinking in wistful appeal, were two chimpanzees.

So these were the ' Wild Beasts of the Jungle ' I had in my curiosity paid a *centime* to see, beasts whose brothers only a few months before had been my companions in their native haunts where cages and civilization were unknown, where life was lived as Nature had ordained it should be, free as the air, without clothes or laws or restrictions. How miserable these little captives looked, shut in their narrow cage, doomed to be stared at and laughed over by unsympathetic spectators for the rest of their lives ! How they must miss their forest life ! Almost without thinking I opened my mouth, threw

back my head, and spoke to them in the deep, guttural language of the great apes, the language which I had learned from my gorilla friends in Central Africa :

" Oh, oh, oh, ah, ah, ah."

There was an immediate reaction. For a moment the chimpanzees looked at me doubtfully. I imagined I could guess their thoughts. ' What is this strange creature,' they seemed to say, ' who speaks our language and yet looks like a human ? Is he a friend ? ' Then their lips curled back over their huge red gums, and they, too, began to speak, shambling slowly over the straw towards me as they did so, their little pale eyes blinking in mingled suspicion and curiosity.

" Ugh, ugh, ugh," they grunted, in their excitement shaking the bars of the cage with powerful fingers.

Stretching my hand through the iron railings, I began to scratch one hairy shoulder, and immediately the grunts changed to deep, ecstatic rumbles, and both apes turned their backs on me, as though begging me to run my fingers through their long, matted hair. I remembered so well doing a similar service for my gorilla comrades when we lived together in the forests of the Gaboon. Often they would come to me, as we wandered happily through the steaming, tangled vegetation, and turn their backs towards me, showing me as plainly as though they had spoken that a burr or bramble had caught in their fur and that they wanted me to remove it. When I had done so they would give little grunts to show their gratitude, and bring me a juicy root or grub in return for my help.

I was awakened from my reverie by a low whistle behind me. At the same time the apes began to mutter together and lift their lips to show their mighty teeth.

" Well, I'll be damned ! " said a harsh voice in French in my ear.

Turning round, I saw a roughly-dressed man in the doorway of the booth, a bright scarlet handkerchief carelessly knotted round his neck, a straw stuck between his teeth. He was looking at me and the chimpanzees with an expression of the utmost stupefaction on his face.

" Those monkeys, *M'sieur,*" he said. " They like you, *hein ?* "

I replied that I knew a great deal about chimpanzees and how to treat them. He nodded his head at that, as if accepting my superiority in such matters, and began to grow confidential.

" They do not like me," he said. " Whenever I go to feed them or clean their cage they snarl at me and try to bite. It is a nuisance, because then I have to whip them, and that makes them dislike me even more." He sighed dolefully and shrugged his shoulders. " Still, one has to expect such things in a circus, *n'est-ce pas ?* "

I answered that I had no knowledge of circus life, but that at least I knew how to make friends with a pair of chimpanzees.

" If you like," I told him, " I will go into the cage and show you how docile they can be. It is only fear of your whip that makes them try to bite you. They will not bite me, because they know I will not hurt them."

My hand was on the iron pin that held the cage

door in place, when he held out a restraining hand.

"It is the old male," he said. "He has a bad temper. You had better be careful, *M'sieur*, or you will lose some blood."

Without taking any notice of his warning, I slipped back the pin and climbed through the narrow door into the cage. The two black apes stood together, watching. I spoke to them softly, with the low, clucking grunt with which I used to greet my gorilla friends in the forest, and began walking slowly towards them, stretching out my hands before me to show that I held no whip or stick in my fingers, for experience in the Gaboon country had taught me that at the first sign of a weapon, an ape will take fright and refuse to be coaxed out of its fear. Before, when I had been outside the cage, the chimpanzees had not been afraid of me, but now, with no bars between us, they were not quite so sure of their ground. They grunted a little together, and stared at me as I advanced.

Slowly, step by step, I went nearer, until I was barely a foot away. I lifted my hand and laid it on the old male's shoulder, and began gently scratching, scratching, down into the shaggy fur. He edged away a little at first, obviously distrustful and on the defensive, while I continued to speak and to part his matted hair with my fingers. At length he seemed to realize that I was a friend, that I wished him no harm, and he opened his mouth as he had done before and talked back, the sound coming from deep down in his throat, in a series of harsh grunts. Then, supreme test of his trust in me, he turned his back towards me as if begging me to scratch further. His haunches

quivered ecstatically at the feel of my fingers. We were friends!

For a little while longer I stayed in the cage with my new-found acquaintances, caressing them gently; and then I slipped through the door again and jumped to the floor. The Frenchman was still watching me, undisguised admiration written all over his face.

"*C'est incroyable!*" he exclaimed, when he saw me safely on the ground again, and none the worse for my adventure. "That big monkey, he did not try to hurt you, even he spoke to you. It is wonderful!"

I was about to leave the booth and continue my tour of the circus which the little adventure had interrupted, when he stopped me. He had evidently just thought of an idea—a good one, to judge from his beaming face—and in his excitement he could hardly blurt it out quickly enough.

"Suppose, *M'sieur*, suppose you were to stay here in the circus with me, and look after the monkeys? You will have a fine time, for we travel all over Europe—from Marseilles we go to Lyons, Paris, Hamburg, Berlin—you will have free board and lodging, and a little salary as well. Oh, it is a hard life, *mon ami*, there is no doubt of that, but it would have its compensations for you. You would be with the animals you love so much. Perhaps you might even train them to appear in the ring with you. Your name, *M'sieur*?" And when I had told him: "'Du Berrie and his Chimpanzees,' or perhaps 'Jeuan's Monkeys'—just think, *mon ami*, how good it would look on a poster! Why, you would become famous in a night!"

I interrupted him with a laugh. I was not looking

for work, I told him. Money jingled in my pockets, enough money to last me for many days to come, and when it ran out my father back at the Consulate in Malta would send me more. I had no need to go trailing round the capitals of Europe in a dirty caravan, training two captive monkeys to perform tricks before a crowd of unsympathetic spectators. That I was in Marseilles at all was due to the fact that my adventures in Central Africa, among the mighty gorilla, which had terminated but a few months before, had left me victim to a wild restlessness which I could in no way conquer. Malta, despite its enchantment of flowers and birds and dazzling sea, no longer held me beneath its spell. Who, having once roamed naked and unfettered in the vast, primeval forests, could hope to settle down to the chains and conventions of civilization ? So my father, wise man that he was, had packed me off in the first cargo-steamer that was leaving Malta, though I was barely twenty-one years old, money in my pockets and the whole world at my disposal, to satisfy the wanderlust that was burning within me.

My first sight of Marseilles was not prepossessing. It seemed to me, leaning over the side of the boat, that it was little better than the dirty coastal towns at which I had stopped on the way to Africa. Men and women of every conceivable nationality clustered on the wharves, shouting and gesticulating. Lascars, Arabs, negroes—they were all there, dirty, ragged, a scar on many a cheek bearing witness to some drunken brawl in a harbour tavern. As I walked down the gangway they hung around me, chattering and gabbling in such a multiplicity of dialects and *patois* that I was almost deafened ; but whether they

were begging for *centimes* or hoping to be taken on as porters, I did not know.

Making my way through the filthy streets, stepping carefully over the heaps of refuse that were lying in the evil-smelling gutters, I found that many of the noisy rabble were still following me. They seemed to know that I was a stranger, and perhaps hoped to lure me into one of the numerous quay-side drinking-houses, where I would be relieved of my money to pay for their glasses of gin. To escape them, rather than for any other reason, I turned into a field, whose grass was trodden into a stretch of dry mud, where a number of stalls and striped booths, and one big white tent in the middle, proclaimed it to be the site of a travelling circus.

I had never been to a real circus before. In Malta, at the time of *carnival,* I had joined in the flower battles, the singing and the gay fandangoes, and had been amused by the inevitable German with his troupe of performing dogs. But the true Sawdust Ring, with its acrobats and clowns and tumblers, was an unknown world to me and one which I was not particularly anxious to discover ; I could not bear the thought of tamed and dejected animals, born to the wild, free life of the forest, being forced at the whip's lash to perform childish and degrading tricks in order to put money into the pockets of their trainers. I knew only too well what it was like to be put in a cage, to be stared at by countless amused and unfeeling people. It was not a pleasant experience, and I had no wish to see helpless animals suffer as I had once suffered. Yet, despite my natural feeling of revulsion, I could not restrain a feeling of curiosity, even excitement, to think that

for the first time in my life I was in the strange, self-contained world of which before I had only read.

It was early in the evening, so early that only a few stray people were strolling about the fair-ground : a pair of lovers, giggling before the tent of a fortune-teller, each obviously wanting the other to take the first plunge into the future ; a horseman, in sombrero and sheepskin chaps, barebacked, practising tricks on a shining roan mare ; and a cluster of wide-eyed children, each with a *centime* clutched in his grimy hand, seemed to be the only people about. It all seemed a little tired and a little naked, like a courtesan before she has adorned herself for the night. In a few hours' time she would be beautiful, sparkling with life and gaiety ; but now, scarcely awakened from her afternoon slumbers, she was dull and almost ugly.

I wandered round, looking at the booths with their red-striped awnings and bright, painted signs ; at the round-abouts, whose wooden horses glared at me disdainfully, their red nostrils distended ; at the hoop-la stall, where an array of trophies was laid out temptingly to be won. Gradually, as evening drew on, the lamps and naphtha flares were lighted, more people flocked into the ground, and music blared out from the merry-go-round. Alone though I was, I began to grow interested and a little excited at the travelling city in which I found myself. There was something strangely appealing and ingenuous about it. In spite of my antipathy towards caged animals, I had almost made up my mind to pay a visit to the circus performance itself, when a placard hanging outside one of the booths caught my attention :

'Wild Beasts of the Jungle,' I read. 'Straight from the Forests of Central Africa!'

My pulse quickened as I read the words. Fate seemed to be having a definite hand in my movements. Was I again to meet some of those creatures I loved so dearly and had known so well in the land of the gorilla? Was it a pair of lumbering elephants, a lion, or a tawny leopard I should find inside the little booth? Could it possibly be an ape? Burning with excitement, I pushed my way through the door and found myself confronting the two pathetic chimpanzees I have just described.

To-day, although gorilla are still something of a rarity in captivity, chimpanzees are well-known figures both in circuses and menageries; but thirty years ago Europe's knowledge of them was mainly due to the descriptions of explorers who had seen or shot them on their travels. Occasionally a specimen was brought home, usually a very young one captured by the natives and exchanged for the brass rings and cotton cloth they treasure so much—I myself had owned several in Malta, brought to me by the kind-hearted sailors in Valetta who knew of my love for wild animals. But on the whole they were rare beasts, distrusted because of their great strength and uncertain temper, and looked upon as remarkable curiosities by the patrons of the circus.

The Frenchman in the booth did not seem at all put out by my refusal to accept his offer to become trainer of his two apes.

"*Eh bien*," he said, shrugging his shoulders philosophically, "it is a great pity. The monkeys, I am sure, would have liked you for their master. They do not find much pleasure in life, the poor

little ones, and I certainly have no time to give it to them."

"But I don't want a job," I protested. "I am here for a holiday, to travel, to see Europe! I have no wish to live in your circus!"

"All right, *Monsieur*, all right," he said. "I have no inclination to persuade you against your will. But still"—he was a sly man, that Frenchman—"you will hardly find a better way to travel around Europe than in a circus. It is a wonderful life, *Monsieur*."

I had no possible intention of yielding to his requests or coaxings. Circus-life was definitely not what I was seeking when I left Malta for Marseilles. So I think it will be agreed that for what occurred that evening in the dirty little fair-booth, and for the strange events that subsequently caused this tale to be written, I am in no way responsible, in no way to blame whatsoever. Any blame, if blame there is, must be given to one of the chimpanzees, who chose that very moment, when I was about to say good-bye to my garrulous Frenchman, to push a hairy arm through the cage bars and clutch wildly at my shoulder. At the same moment both of them began to grunt softly and beat with their feet on the sandy floor of the cage.

"Ugh, ugh, ugh," they said, telling me as plainly as though in actual words that they liked me and wished to be friends.

When I sought to disentangle the clinging, fleshy fingers preparatory to leaving, the chimpanzee refused to let me go, instead placing his flaccid lips to my hand and nibbling gently, as though trying to kiss me.

All my resolutions faded before this unsolicited display of affection. In spite of the dark hut, the iron bars, and the chattering Frenchman, I seemed to be back in the forests, talking with those gigantic, faithful friends of mine, the apes, receiving their love and giving them mine in return. I remembered the old gorilla who had given his life for mine. Vividly, as though it were yesterday, I heard the groan which issued from his lips as he fell dying, shot through the heart by a white man's bullet. Now, I could not betray these two brothers of his, lonely and forlorn in their little cage. It would be ungrateful and treacherous. Involuntarily, almost against my will, I spoke to the Frenchman.

"All right," I said. "For a little while I will join the circus and look after the chimpanzees."

He was highly delighted at my sudden change of decision. I have a suspicion that he was desperately afraid of his charges and was heartily glad to have their care taken off his shoulders. At any rate, he pranced forward and clapped me gaily on the back.

"Hurra!" he cried. "I knew you would change your mind. When can you start?"

"At once," I replied. "I have no other plans."

We shook hands solemnly on the agreement, and with no further words, my life in the circus began.

CHAPTER TWO

THE BIG TOP

IT is a rare occurrence for outsiders—amateurs, they might be called—to be suddenly introduced into a travelling circus. From time to time, of course, fresh hands are engaged to help with the erection of the tents and booths, or to replace the men who leave for a different life ; but on the whole the circus is a self-contained world, proud of its traditions and suspicious of any layman who ventures to intrude. The performers themselves are usually born to the ring, often actually making their appearance in the world while the show is on tour. From their earliest days they are taught to follow in their parents' footsteps, to walk the wire rope, to tumble, to swing on the trapeze, and as a matter of course their whole lives are ruled by the laws of the Sawdust Ring. Although they are made up of a conglomeration of nationalities, and the colour of their faces ranges from coal-black to dusky red and pale yellow, they look upon themselves as one large family, with common aims and interests. Yet, in spite of their innate friendliness, they regard all strangers as intruders.

Knowing this, I regard my almost involuntary introduction to the circus as all the more astonishing and unusual. Having turned the matter over and

over in my mind, I have come to the conclusion that the Frenchman never really intended that I should take my place among the performers in the Ring. He was afraid of the chimpanzees and saw in me an easy way to get over his fear; but apart from that, his promises were like so much of the circus material—made for effect and nothing more.

He must have been surprised when he found that I refused to take them so.

Arrangements for my welfare at the circus certainly did not lack simplicity. I was given a little box-like room by the side of the chimpanzees' cage, a rough mattress and a few blankets for my bed, and told that I could wash at the water-tap outside. I was directed to the place where straw and food were kept for the animals—" They must be well fed, those monkeys," said the Frenchman, " so that they will not snap at visitors "—and with that my employer's interest in me seemed to wane. I had become just another cog in the wheel of the circus, and would be henceforth treated as such.

Such behaviour, however, did not please me at all. Against my will I had been persuaded to look after the chimpanzees, and I considered that I should be allowed a few privileges for my pains, not looked upon as a mere cage-boy. Besides, had not my friend drawn lurid pictures of my future in the Ring? Well, he should help me to turn them into reality.

" Please," I said, " will you take me to see the proprietor of the circus? "

He gaped a little at that.

" *Eh hé, mon brave,*" he stuttered. " What would you want with *le Vieux?* "

" To arrange with him about my act," I answered haughtily, although I had not the vaguest conception of what that act was to be, except that it concerned the two apes.

" But he has enough acts, *le Vieux !* " he gasped, his jaw dropping as he realized that I was taking his airy promises literally. " You are not trained for circus work. The monkeys have never been in the Ring before. It is impossible."

" Nevertheless, I will see him," I replied firmly.

The Frenchman—his name, he told me, was Jules —was so surprised that he led the way without another word.

The fairground by now was crowded with townspeople. The day's work was over, and they had come to enjoy themselves in the magic world of the circus, to gaze in awe at the strange beasts in the menagerie, to applaud the prancing horses with their nodding silver plumes, to pay a *centime* for a ride on one of the wooden steeds of the roundabout. At every booth, red-faced men and women were hoarsely shouting the attractions of the show inside, trying to drown the voices of their rivals on left and right, beating drums and clashing tinny cymbals ; in the distance, audible even above the din, came the rumbling roar of a lion, hungry for its meat ; while beneath the white vault of the big tent, crowds were already pushing their way to the best seats, for the show was due to begin in an hour's time, and excitement was hovering in the air.

Jules led the way through the throng of sightseers, skilfully dodging the paper streamers and balloons that were waving in his path, and I followed. Now that it was filled with the noise and laughter

of excited people, the fair seemed a far more friendly and impressive place than it had done earlier, when I had found it lonely and deserted. In spite of myself, a thrill of pleasure ran through me, to think that I was actually a part of this great machine, this travelling town on wheels, and not merely one of the gaping townsfolk. I grew more than ever determined to train the two chimpanzees and make my own appearance in the Ring.

At the back of the Big Top were a row of caravans each with little lace-curtained windows and a brightly painted door. To the largest of these, one that stood a little apart from the rest and was gleaming with white and crimson paint, Jules led me.

"This is the home of *le Vieux*," he told me. "Wait here a moment, and I will find out if he is willing to see you."

He disappeared inside the little bright door, and I was left contemplating the scene before me.

Evidently this was the residential part of the circus, where the artistes pitched their caravans for the few days they remained in one particular place. Some of them, I was later to discover, did not live in such a nomadic fashion, preferring to travel on the road with the wagons and take lodgings in the town as soon as they arrived. But most of the richer folk, or those with large families, found a movable home far more convenient and would not have exchanged their caravans for the grandest hotel in the town.

In a field nearby a number of horses were grazing, obviously the animals used for drawing the caravans and wagons—for this was before the time of motor transport—while the wagons themselves, some of

them nearly twenty feet long, were standing some distance away, their empty shafts sticking out forlornly. Two dark-haired children were running around, a barking dog leaping between their legs, busy with a game of ' tag,' and in the doorway of one of the caravans a young woman was sitting, making some garment from a length of bright blue cotton. Smoke blew merrily from the tin chimneys. An appetizing smell of stew floated towards me.

Jules came slowly down the steps of the caravan and beckoned me forward.

" *Eh bien,* I have seen him," he said. " He will speak to you for a few minutes, only you must be quick, for the show begins in three-quarters of an hour."

I walked up the steps of the caravan and knocked at the door. " *Entrez,*" said a deep voice, and I went in.

Le Vieux, or the Old Man, as he was variously known, according to the nationality of the speaker—I never discovered his real name—was sitting at a table, fingering one of the tassels of the crimson cloth and looking through a pile of papers. Around the walls of the little room was a fantastic collection of photographs, playbills, placards, in a variety of languages, some of which I was quite unable to decipher, and thrown carelessly on the chairs were a number of miscellaneous garments : a silk hat, very shiny, a crumpled tarlatan skirt, spangled with sequins, and a long, curling whip.

I was looking at all these indications of circus life when the man at the table, thinking no doubt that I had stared long enough, addressed me. He was well past middle-age, with white hair and a

marvellously wrinkled face, but his voice was as clear and sharp as the crack of his whip. He wasted no time on preliminaries.

" So you have decided to join the circus," he said in French. " Jules tells me that you have a fondness for the chimpanzees."

" Yes, *Monsieur ;* I intend to train them for the Ring," I answered boldly.

He smiled a little at that, but in a kindly way, rather as though he were humouring a small boy, or a harmless lunatic.

" Oh, and what makes you think you could do that ? " he asked. " Chimpanzees can be very savage beasts at times, you know ; even though these two seem to regard you as their brother."

It was my turn to smile. If he wanted my reasons, he should have them. Without further ado I plunged into a rapid account of my adventures in Central Africa, where for many months I had lived naked and unarmed, with no other companions save the Kings of the Jungle, the mighty gorilla. If that wonderful experience had not taught me how to manage any ape alive, I told him, nothing ever would.

By the time I had finished my narrative I could see that the ' Old Man ' was quite impressed, although a shadow of scepticism still remained on his face. He seemed to be weighing up the matter, visualizing my possible appearance in the Ring with the chimpanzees, when all at once he looked at his watch and gave an exclamation.

" I must go," he said, reaching for his silk hat and whip. " The show begins in fifteen minutes' time, and it would never do for me to be late. Well," as I began to protest that we had come to no definite

arrangement, " I will give you two months in which to devise an act for the Ring. If you have not trained the chimpanzees by that time, you never will. Now come and see the performance."

I was so pleased with his decision that I wanted to go off and begin training the apes at once, until common sense asserted itself and I realized that I must wait until the morning. Nothing at all could be gained by rushing off and worrying the chimpanzees just as they were preparing for sleep. To begin the difficult task of handling them, I must have them alert and fresh, with brains lively and wide-awake. So by the side of the ' Old Man ' himself, resplendent in frock-coat and silk hat, I went off to the Big Top to see the show.

Under the wide folds of the tent there was an air of hushed expectancy. The benches were crowded with people, all wearing that expression, half-excited, half-awed, which is seen on the faces of circus audiences, but never at the theatre. It is an expression born somehow of the very essence of the Ring, of the pungent smell of the horses, the white faces of the clowns, the occasional slices of night-sky seen between the folds of the tent roof ; and it is found in no other sort of entertainment. The naphtha flares blazed out as a draught caught them and sent them swirling, giving a harsh light round their immediate vicinity but leaving the upper half of the dome shrouded in darkness. A clown, dressed in huge check pantaloons and white ruffles, sprinkled sawdust over the arena, tumbling over himself with foolish antics as he did so. Everything was ready for the show to begin.

Strangely enough, although that was the first

circus performance that I had ever seen, I can remember few of the individual turns. There were horses, of course, who trotted round the Ring in time to the music of a drum and two trumpets, their beautiful necks curved by the bearing-reins into graceful arcs, stood in green tubs, and knelt humbly at the playing of the 'Marseillaise'; a troupe of French poodles, with tangled black hair cut into weird knots and patterns, who played football, balanced lumps of sugar on their noses, and yapped everlastingly; a girl with fair curls and a stiff ballet skirt, who walked the high wire, a parasol balanced gracefully over her head; and a cage of six lions, lithe, tawny creatures, who obeyed the curt commands of their trainer without a murmur, wrestled together, posed majestically and disdainfully on high black pedestals, and finally leaped through flaming hoops to the loud applause of the audience: these were the acts which I still recall to mind. But the rest of the performance, which must surely have included the usual equestrian feats—trick-riding and *haute école*—trapeze work and comic turns, has faded completely from my memory. After watching the same show night after night, individual acts of one particular night—even the first—scarcely stand out at all. I soon became so accustomed to the show that it meant nothing to me. The roar of the lions no longer conjured up visions of the jungle life I had lost. The high-wire-walking ceased to give me unpleasant qualms whenever I looked at the length of the drop below. All the magic and mystery of the circus was dissipated by the extremely unmysterious rehearsals which were soon to become a part of my everyday life.

The next day I began my task of preparing the two chimpanzees for the Ring.

Despite their manlike appearance and their love of imitation, it is not always an easy matter to train chimpanzees to perform even the simplest tricks. They differ tremendously in intelligence and brain power—even in the actual size of the brain—so that perhaps only one out of a hundred is really suitable for teaching. Some of them, especially the older ones, develop a terrible temper, and once they realize the extent of their great strength, it is almost impossible to deal with them. The ideal method, therefore, is to begin training while the animals are still young and to try to find out their characteristics. One, for instance, may be particularly fond of using his legs: he can be trained to ride a little bicycle, use roller skates, and walk upright. Another may be especially adept at using his arms and fingers: he is shown how to play with a bat and ball, and how to drink tea from a cup. A third may be inordinately vain: he is dressed up in a little evening suit. In this way each chimpanzee is doing the work he likes best, and therefore he is happy doing it.

Most people think that all chimpanzees look alike, but to the experienced naturalist they differ considerably, some of their faces being much flatter than others, some longer. They differ, too, in colour. The Coast chimpanzee has a fairly white face and a light coat, while specimens from the Gaboon and Nigeria are much darker, with jet-black hair on their shoulders. The animals in the circus were of the latter kind.

I knew from experience among the gorilla in Central Africa that it was necessary to spend almost all

of my time with my charges, if I was to gain their complete confidence and train them properly; and I made arrangements with Jules to feed and water them myself, forbidding any interference from the rest of the circus folk. So far, they had only been on exhibition to the public in the cage where I had first seen them, and as a result they were morose and inclined to be vicious. Until they are used to it, apes resent being teased and stared at. An ill-advised chuckle will send them hurtling against the bars, shaking them in ungovernable rage. My two charges had been driven almost crazy by the conduct of the visitors who came to laugh at them and poke them with pointed sticks, and I knew that I should have to handle them very carefully before they would be ready to be shown in the Ring. With the proprietor's permission, therefore, and Jules' consent, it was arranged that they should no longer be exhibited to the public until I considered that the proper time had arrived. I acquired a tent, and a portable training-cage which could be rigged up inside the canvas, but gave the animals plenty of room in which to run about; and here, free from all observation, I began my task.

The first time I let them out into the training-cage, the male of the two, a big, strong fellow about four years old, made one rush at me, as though to demolish me with one stroke of his hairy forearm. Much to his amazement, I did not run away but stood my ground, waiting for him to advance. Always before, humans had fled at his approach, shrieking in terror, and he could not understand my behaviour at all. He stopped in his tracks, a puzzled expression stealing over his face, and then, instead

of continuing his advance, he slowly retreated, backing gradually to the bars of the cage. Now it was my turn to move. I walked slowly towards him, speaking in the ape-language I had learned in the forest, holding out my hands and trying to reassure him ; and soon, when he found that I had no intention of hurting him, both he and the female began frolicking about the cage, leaping across the floor and swinging from bar to bar. After dreary months —possibly even years—cooped up in their narrow cage, it must have been wonderful for them suddenly to find they had room to jump and play.

For two days I made no further attempt to begin training. It was essential for them to grow accustomed both to the cage and to me, and, although the time at my disposal was very short, I knew that it was useless to hurry them. Then, when I decided that they had quite accepted me as their friend, I began my experiments.

I got hold of two little tricycles, suitable for children, and left them in the cage for a few days. Then I took a bicycle and rode it round the tent, in full view of the chimpanzees. At first they were frightened of the strange new objects in their cage, and backed away, chattering excitedly together, but after a time they became reassured and even went so far as to climb on the leather seats and hold the handle-bars in imitation of me. As soon as they began to pedal round the cage a little, jerkily, and with frequent stops, I stood ready, my pockets full of titbits, to reward them for their efforts. Sunflower seeds, particularly, were regarded as a choice prize. Gradually it was born in upon them that rewards were forthcoming in return for a little

activity on their part, and so their dexterity grew.

It was a comparatively easy step from tricycles to ordinary two-wheeled bicycles. The bicycles were so small that if one of the chimpanzees lost his balance, he could stretch down a long, hairy arm and regain it. After a great deal of patience, therefore, and a large expenditure in the shape of sunflower seeds and knobs of sugar, the trick was mastered.

I taught them next how to turn back-somersaults, by making them stoop down and put their arms through their legs, and then hoisting them over their arms. After a time they grew so fond of this form of exercise that they were always doing it and needed no titbits to spur them on. They learned how to laugh at the word of command, showing their teeth in a hideous grin ; how to salute, shake hands, walk steadily on their hindquarters ; how to hang cherries on their ears like ear-rings ; and how to sit up at a table and drink from china cups. They also indulged in several unrehearsed turns, such as kissing me gently on the face when they wanted a titbit, and spitting across the cage, an objectionable habit with which they showed their dislike of strangers. I dressed them in little suits, the female in a bright dress, the male in a tiny blouse and trousers, and they pranced around proudly, as pleased with themselves as two children.

In six weeks' time they were sufficiently trained, not to appear before the public, but to take their place in rehearsals. The first rehearsal was something of an ordeal both for them and for me. Out under the vastness of the Big Top, without the comforting feel of the cage-bars round them, they

were confused and frightened and had to be reassured with titbits and soothing words. The audience, composed of circus hands, talked and laughed, as I had asked them to do, and for a time the chimpanzees were so scared that they did nothing but run round me in circles, whimpering piteously. I brought in the bicycles, but they did not seem to understand what they were for. I told them to shake hands with me, but they stared at me without raising their arms. Altogether, I spent about an hour trying to restore their confidence and courage.

Two weeks elapsed, during which I managed, after long effort, to accustom the chimpanzees to the Ring, to the clash of the band, and the noise of the audience. By constant repetition they mastered every trick of their repertoire, even adding a few of their own to the ones I had taught them. Exactly one day after the time-limit set by the ' Old Man ' I walked into his caravan and told him that my act was ready for the Ring.

All this time the circus was moving slowly northwards, making for Lyons. We stopped at all the towns and large villages on the banks of the Rhone —Arles, Avignon, Valence and others—and gave performances, sometimes staying as long as three days, or even a week, as we had done at Marseilles, if the houses were good, sometimes remaining only one night and moving on again in the morning.

On the road I travelled on the wagon which held the chimpanzees, often going into their cage to reassure them, for if the road were particularly bumpy they grew frightened and began to whine and even fight together. As soon as we reached our destination, and the work of putting up the tents and

SHOOTING THE RAPIDS, RIVER CONGO

'WIDE, ROLLING PLAINS, WITH MILES OF SOFT GRASS RELIEVED HERE AND THERE BY A BAOBAB TREE'

JEUAN DU BERRIE

THE AUTHOR IN ARAB COSTUME

booths began, I pitched my own small tent and took out the chimpanzees for rehearsal. After a time the routine grew monotonous in the extreme, and I was overjoyed when on reaching Vienne, I think it was, I was told by the ' Old Man ' that I could have an Act of ten minutes in the show that evening.

" You will be between the Liberty Horses and the High-Wire Act," he told me. " See that you are ready to begin directly the horses have left the Ring."

I was thrilled beyond words. For the past two months I had been a mere nonentity in the circus, too busy training my charges and keeping away curious intruders to enter into the life of the Ring or to make friends with any of the performers. Now I had an Act of my own, and vowed to myself that henceforth I would be a real member of the troupe.

Slowly the time for the performance drew on. I dressed the chimpanzees—*Max* and *Maxine* I called them—in their little costumes, and myself wore an evening suit borrowed from the ' Old Man.' All that evening, before I was due to appear, I fondled the apes, spoke to them and caressed them, in order to soothe them and put them in a good humour. Then, when the last of the cream Liberty Horses had galloped away, silver plumes nodding, white manes tossing proudly, I took my charges by the hand and led them into the Ring.

There was an immediate burst of laughter, and I began to feel a little uncomfortable. The chimpanzees, I knew, looked comically human in their brightly-coloured suits, and I ought to have been prepared for their reception. Nevertheless, remem-

bering how they disliked being laughed at, for a moment I wondered if they would behave themselves, or if they would run screaming towards the audience.

I need not have worried.

They went through their repertoire of tricks without a hitch. Far from being annoyed at the laughter and applause, they seemed to enjoy it, to understand that it was given in appreciation of their performance, and they entered wholeheartedly into the show. They rode their little bicycles without once falling off, or having to stretch down to regain their balance. They turned somersault after somersault, and *Maxine*, after watching the audience clap their hands at *Max*'s efforts, began to clap also, a trick which I had never taught her to do. When the ten minures were over, and I took them out of the Ring, both waving vigorously to the applauding spectators, I felt well pleased with my efforts. Even the 'Old Man,' not usually given to praising the members of his troupe, came and complimented me on the performance.

"We will make it a regular feature on the Bill," he said. "'*Jeuan et ses Chimpanzés*'. It will look fine. When we reach Lyons you can buy some more properties and enlarge the Act—also a costume for yourself and new ones for the monkeys—and I will increase your salary. Meanwhile, be prepared to take the chimpanzees into the Ring every night."

These few curt words made me a real member of the circus, a performer whose name was written up on playbills and programmes, a Star Turn. In spite of myself I began to feel a thrill of pride in my comic little charges, and laboured to perfect the Act and

enlarge it. The atmosphere of the Ring gradually wove its insidious spell in my veins. If it had not been for a strange, inexplicable adventure that befell me at Lyons, and subsequent events that suddenly reawakened a past which I had thought was dead, I might still be travelling round the world, with younger and cleverer *Maxes* and *Maxines*, training them for the pleasure of the public. As it was, by a stroke of fate I rediscovered a lure stronger than the lure of the circus—the call of the African forest —and I left the Sawdust Ring never to return to it again.

CHAPTER THREE

THE MYSTERY OF THE DRIED HEAD

A CIRCUS contains a more cosmopolitan collection of men and women than it would be possible to find anywhere else in so small an area. In my particular community there were performers of about twenty different nationalities, all living together in perfect amity, all chattering their various weird languages and dialects, and at the same time managing to evolve a kind of home-made esperanto in order to be able to speak intelligibly to each other. If ever there were any disturbances—and they were not infrequent—they were usually settled without much difficulty. If intervention by the rest of us did not suffice to separate the parties concerned, the ' Old Man ' himself was called in. He would not tolerate fighting : it had, he said, a definite and disastrous effect on the performance of the troupe. One sharp word from him, therefore, and the offenders slunk away to their respective huts and caravans, enemies no longer.

Chinese contortionists, with their inscrutable yellow faces and tiny hands and feet, pattered about the ground in bright silken tunics. Cossacks from the Kuban exercised their prancing horses in the fields, their shabby white *papakhas* clamped firmly on their heads, their long lances gleaming. Red Indian

braves, gay with fluttering eagle feathers, Canadian cowboys, Australian knife-throwers, silent brown fakirs: all these had at some time or other found their way into the circus and carved their own little niche in its walls. And besides all these exotic folk, there was a multitude of Europeans—Frenchmen, Germans, Italians, Englishmen—all with different outlooks, different views on life, all anxious to make a success of the strange, unreal world of the circus.

Now that I was a performer myself, and had time to cultivate these fellow-troupers of mine, I went about among them, eager to discover if they were willing to be friendly with me. I soon found that the majority of them needed careful study before I could hope to understand them. The Cossacks, for instance, looked upon as kings in their own land, were as proud as their Czar himself, and I quickly realized that I must treat them with a certain amount of deference if I were to overcome their natural aloofness and dignity. The Chinese, too, were reserved, in spite of their wide, expansive smiles; but the Colonials, on the other hand, were hail-fellow-well-met with everyone, me included, and often invited me round to their caravan, after the show was over, where they regaled me with steaming coffee and told me stories of their lives in the back-woods and the bush, before they had been persuaded by some circus-proprietor on the look-out for new material, to leave their native land and join the troupe.

In time I became acquainted with all these people, if not exactly friendly with every one of them, and learned to appreciate their generosity, their diligence,

their devotion to the circus. They accepted me as one of themselves and never once questioned my right to be called a fellow-worker. Only one man remained inimical: Jules, the Frenchman. Jealous of my success, furious with me because I had taken away his chimpanzees and forced him to find a less profitable job, he did all he could to annoy me. If he had been able, I think he would have tried to spoil my Act, but luckily for me, he was genuinely afraid of the apes and did not dare to approach them. To balance his hostility, however, I found a friend who was later to be the means of changing my whole future, the prelude to an adventure almost unique in the history of exploration.

He was a little African cage-boy, employed by the German lion-tamer to feed the lions and clean out their cages while they were in the Ring. His name, he told me, was Sebah. I had come across him one day lying face downwards in a heap of straw at the side of one of the cages, shivering with terror. Although I had never seen him before I was struck by the little brown figure, clad only in a dirty loin-cloth, crouched in the yellow heap, the picture of dejection and terror.

"What is the matter?" I asked.

He looked up at me, his solemn brown eyes sizing me up shrewdly. 'Are you a friend or an enemy?' he seemed to be wondering. Evidently the decision reached was a favourable one, for he began to speak.

"My master beat me," he said, pronouncing the words carefully. "He told me to go into the cage with Cæsar, and I would not, for Cæsar is angry to-day." He looked up fearfully at the great tawny

creature, pacing up and down behind the iron bars, lashing his tail angrily from side to side. "When I refused, he beat me with his whip for being a coward, and went in himself. And behold! Cæsar was as meek as a new-born lamb—which was a pity," he finished whimsically.

"Does he often beat you?"

Sebah shrugged his brown shoulders.

"All white men beat us," he said. "It is their right. But my master drinks a lot of fire-water, which makes him angry, and then he beats me more. If it were not for the lions, I might perhaps go away."

"Do you love them so much?" I asked.

"So much," he answered simply. "Sometimes, of course, they get angry, like Cæsar, and then I am frightened. But when they are gentle, then I love them and know that I could never go away. Even Cæsar, although he terrifies me, is my friend."

This strange philosophy interested me. Like me, Sebah felt an affinity with the wild beasts of the jungle, counted them as his friends even though at times they frightened him. Moreover, he came presumably from the land that I loved so well, the great forests of Central Africa. Here, I felt, was someone whom I could understand better than anyone else in the whole of the circus.

"Would you like me to be your friend, too?" I asked.

Sebah stared at me in astonishment.

"But you are a white man!" he exclaimed. "You cannot be friends with a black boy!"

"But I like black boys," I protested. "I have known many of them. Listen!" And I proceeded

to tell him of my adventures in the Gaboon, where I had lived for months in a native village, revered as a chieftain and a god. " So you see, I shall not beat you."

He listened in wonderment as I recounted my exploits in the land of his birth. ' Here, too,' he seemed to be thinking, ' is one who loves as much as I do, the animals of the wild.' At the end of the recital he gravely held out a little brown hand.

" Yes, white man, I should like to be your friend," he said.

We shook hands deliberately, I, a tall, burly man even at that early age, he, a little, undersized African native. To any spectator it must have seemed a strange sight, that solemn handshake between such an ill-assorted pair, but to us it was the beginning of a friendship that, for me at least, was to have a significance and a sequel that few men would have guessed.

Sebah and I became inseparable. When he was not in my tent, watching me rehearse my chimpanzees and teach them new tricks, I was over at the lions' wagon, watching him throw great lumps of dripping meat into the cages. I had never been at such close quarters to the forest cats before, and their lean beauty and the ferocity of their yellow eyes fascinated me. There were six of them altogether, and for five of them Sebah had a wonderful affection. He scratched their necks and rubbed their rough noses, showing not the slightest fear at the close proximity of their claws and gleaming fangs. Rather, he seemed to be proud of their mighty strength. But one beast was different : Cæsar, the

huge old lion-king, with his wicked little eyes and shaggy mane, would rarely respond to the boy's caresses. He growled menacingly, deep down in his red throat, lashed his tail and unsheathed his claws, so that Sebah backed away, his face a brown mask of terror.

" He is not good, that old lion," he stammered. " He will not be my friend."

As for Sebah's master, Herr Fritz, the German, as I will call him, he regarded our friendship as something ludicrous, and twisted his black, waxed moustaches scornfully whenever he caught sight of us together.

" What do you want with that nigger of mine, eh, Herr du Berrie ? " he asked me one day, his breath reeking with the rum he drank at all hours of the day. " You want to steal him for your Act, *nicht ?* "

" He is my friend," I replied.

" *Ach,* your friend ! What do you want with a nigger friend ? " he sneered. " They are all liars and thieves, those niggers, you can never trust them with anything. He is a coward, too, that Sebah ; he is scared of Cæsar. But one day he *shall* go into his cage, mark my words. He shall go into the cage and put him through his paces." And he strode away a little unsteadily, cracking his whip against his boots as he went.

I reported the meeting to Sebah, and he looked up at me and smiled a little tremulously.

" He will make me go into the cage one day, I know it," he whispered. " And if Cæsar sees that I am frightened—as I shall be—he will find a mighty strength within himself. He will forget that I am a man and he a beast. He will think he is back in

the desert again, and he will spring. Ah, well," with a philosophic shrug of the shoulders, " it is as the gods will." And he would say no more.

All African natives are fatalists, always expecting the worst to happen and evincing a kind of shocked surprise when they find that it does not, so that I did not pay particular attention to Sebah's pessimistic speech. Moreover, much as I disliked the lion-trainer's blustering ways and drunken brutality, I never thought for one minute that he would carry out his threat. I was wrong.

One night, while the performance was in progress and I was in the Ring with my chimpanzees, a sudden, low, menacing roar sounded from the back, rumbling and echoing through the arena ; one of the most hideous, cold-blooded, evil noises that I have ever heard. The chimpanzees, used as they were to the noises of the circus, slid abruptly off their bicycles at the sound and crouched beside me, shivering and whimpering, and had to be pacified with caresses and titbits before they would continue with their Act.

" One of the lions must have got loose," I said to myself.

Vaguely, as I put the apes through their tricks, I heard sounds of commotion outside the Big Top, but although I had only been a member of the circus for a short time, I had learned its chief rule : the show must go on whatever happens. So, strong though my curiosity was, I finished the Act. It seemed to go more slowly than ever before, but at last it was over and I was able to leave the Ring.

I was met by one of the cowboys.

" There has been an accident," he said. " The little African has been hurt by one of his lions. He is calling for you."

Leaving my apes with the Canadian, I hurried off to the wagons which held the lions' cages. On a heap of straw, just where I had first seen him, lay Sebah, five long jagged tears in his breast showing where a lion's claws had bitten deep. Blood was everywhere.

I bent over him, and he opened his eyes and smiled.

" It was Cæsar," he murmured. " I knew he did not like me. I was afraid to go into his cage, but I had to go." He paused for a moment, fighting for breath as pain took hold of him. Then a sudden urgency lit up his eyes, and he strove to speak again. " In the corner," he gasped, " under Bella's cage—a box, a big, black box—take the Head, the Head, white man—take the Head to Africa."

I nodded uncomprehendingly, hoping to soothe him, and he smiled a little, a smile of contentment. His eyes flickered.

" I meant to tell you before," he muttered drowsily, " only somehow I forgot. But it is all right : I have told you now." His voice faded away into a gurgle. He gasped for breath, and the air, drawn through his pierced lungs, made a noise as of bubbling water. Suddenly he went limp in my arms, and died without another word.

As I laid him gently in the straw and covered his face with my handkerchief, I felt a step close beside me and looked up to see Herr Fritz standing at my side. He was reeling unsteadily, obviously drunk, and his speech came thickly through half-closed lips.

" It was his own fault," he muttered. " I told him to put fresh sand in the cage, and he was frightened. Cæsar saw he was afraid and sprang at him. If he had not been a coward, it would never have happened. Directly I called Cæsar off, he left the boy and came to me."

" But not before he had killed Sebah ! " I shouted, suddenly furious with the drunken brute who had caused the death of my little friend. " You knew he was afraid of Cæsar, you knew that Cæsar would spring at him, and yet you forced him to go in the cage. You are nothing less than a murderer ! "

" Come, come," he blustered. " That is not the way to talk to your superiors. You should choose your words more carefully, young man."

But I was beyond all care. I remembered that low, blood-curdling roar I had heard, and knew that at that very moment Cæsar must have sprung at my terrified little friend. I could imagine his helplessness as the great tawny beast came thundering over him, the nightmare feeling that must have been his, and suddenly I could bear it no longer.

" Yes, you are a murderer ! " I shouted. " And shall be treated as such ! "

Before the German knew what I was doing, I had jumped up and wrenched from his hand the huge whip that he always carried. Then, as he stood there, swaying slightly, staring at me, no sign of comprehension in his bleared eyes, I began to beat him, feeling a kind of unholy joy as the lash curled wickedly about his shoulders. He screamed as he felt the leather thong flick against his bare neck, and tried to back away, but by now my passion was fully aroused. I could see nothing but that hateful red

face, that shining uniform. I exulted in my revenge, in my superior strength and advantage, and continued to wield the whip until my arm ached and my victim was stretched unconscious on the floor.

Then, and then only, did I pause for breath. Slowly the red light faded from before my eyes and I grew saner. Sebah was dead and his murderer was lying helpless at my feet. There was nothing more that I could do. Turning on my heel, I walked away.

The next morning brought its recriminations, however. Jules came to me with a smirk on his foxy little face and told me that *le Vieux* wished to see me.

"You had better be careful," he warned. "He is in a great rage."

He certainly was. When he thumped down his fist upon the table, the whole caravan shook with the force of his action. I could tell at a glance that my association with the circus was about to come to an end.

"So you think you can kill my lion-trainer!" he thundered, as soon as I had entered the room. "And all because of the cowardice of his cage-boy. I've a good mind to thrash you within an inch of your life, as you dared to thrash Herr Fritz."

"But Sebah was my friend," I protested.

"That is no excuse," he replied. "I can get plenty more cage-boys, but trainers are not so easily come by. Herr Fritz will be unfit for at least a month, and who will work the lions in the meantime? For two pins I would make you do it."

I murmured that I would not mind trying

" Well, you won't have an opportunity, because you won't be here. You are sacked, do you hear ? Sacked ! Think yourself lucky that I don't demand compensation. And don't let me catch you here after to-night, or it will be the worse for you ! "

He flung a handful of coins on to the table—presumably my salary—and turned his back upon me. I made no attempt to take them. I was burning with indignation, with the injustice of life, and of the ' Old Man ' particularly. I told myself, rather childishly, I fear, that I would not stay on now even if the whole circus begged me on bended knees to remain ! I would say good-bye to the two chimpanzees—poor little creatures, who would look after them now ?—and once more set off alone on my travels.

Walking down the steps of the caravan, I suddenly remembered Sebah's dying words. I had been too much concerned about him to play close attention to them, but some vague recollection of the lioness Bella, and something about a Head, and Africa, stirred in my brain. Definitely there was some mystery to be investigated, and I walked quickly towards the lions' wagons.

No one was about. The lions, as if sensing that something was wrong with their master, paced their narrow cages moodily, yellow eyes blinking, tails lashing against lean flanks. Only Cæsar, the cause of all the trouble, lay still, gently licking his chops, from time to time a convulsive shudder running down his tawny spine. For the first time in his career he had tasted human blood, had discovered

that he could conquer Man, and life for him would never be quite the same again.

The cage of Bella, the lioness, was in a corner, in a gloomier spot than the others, for she was a nervous creature and afraid of the bright sunlight. I groped beneath it, and soon my hand came into contact with something hard. I pulled on it carefully, and drew out an old black box tied with rope —Sebah's treasure-chest. Untying the knotted cord, I flung open the lid.

The contents seemed at first singularly disappointing. There was an old spear head, with one or two ominous chips in its rusty blade ; a length of bright cotton cloth ; a handful of broken cowrie shells ; and, at the bottom, something wrapped up in a dirty piece of cloth. As I picked up this last object, a strange premonition assailed me, a feeling that some adventure was about to unfold before me. I drew off the cloth.

The object disclosed to my startled gaze, was a dried head !

It was small and withered, and the skin, pale brown in colour, was stretched tightly over the cheek-bones. Tufts of black, matted hair still adhered to the scalp. The lips, dark and scaly, were drawn back over the yellow teeth in a hideous leer. It was such a horrible thing that I was tempted to fling it away from me and run, but then the memory of Sebah, dying on his heap of dirty straw, rushed back to me. I remembered his muttered words about the Head, and Africa, and my imagination, never far away from the Dark Continent that I loved so well, began to soar. Perhaps this ghastly trophy held some message for me, some secret that

it was my lot to investigate. Carefully wrapping it in the cloth, and pushing back the chest into the recess where I had found it, I stole softly away, my grim prize hidden beneath my coat.

The time had come when I must say good-bye to my chimpanzees and go away, and I walked over to their tent sadly. Although I had only known them a few short months, I had learned to love them and understand their ways. I knew they would miss me. Above all things I hoped that Jules, who would presumably be given charge of them again, would treat them kindly and not abuse the trust I had taught them to put in Mankind.

When they saw me coming they rushed to the cage door, grunting with pleasure and leaping joyfully up and down. I opened the doors and went in, and immediately they sprang round me, caressing me in their animal fashion, touching me gently with their lips and running their huge fingers up and down my arm. They seemed to sense that something was the matter, and for once they did not clamour for titbits or delve into my pockets for sunflower seeds. For the last time I tickled their ears and scratched their hairy backs. For the last time I made them shake hands with me, turn somersaults, catch little rubber balls. Then, quickly, tears filling my eyes, I jumped down to the ground, fastening the cage-door behind me, and with their barking call ringing in my ears, I strode out of the tent.

The fairground was deserted. The performers were still sleeping after their exertions, or else were rehearsing their turns in the Ring. Not a soul was about to witness my ignominious departure. In front of me, a long, white ribbon, dusty with dry

chalk, stretched the long road to Marseilles, the road we had travelled for the past months. With no luggage save my gruesome find, which was still hidden beneath its covering cloth, I began to walk purposefully along it.

CHAPTER IV

THE LURE OF AFRICA

IT took me just under ten days to reach the coast again, and during all that time I was turning over in my mind the tragedy which had terminated my connection with the circus. What message had Sebah been trying to convey to me before he died? What was the significance of the ghastly trophy which I carried hidden beneath my coat? I pondered the matter endlessly, gazed at the Head until I knew every wrinkle in its brown skin, hung it up each night in the bedroom of the inn where I happened to be staying, until it became an increasingly important part of my existence. In spite of its hideous appearance, it fascinated me. It seemed to remind me of my adventures in Central Africa, to take me back to those days in the steaming forests when I had lived alone with Nature. Almost, when I looked at it, I could hear the haunting throb of the drums, those drums which, once heard, are never forgotten by the African traveller. They seemed to be calling out to me, bidding me to return. The restlessness within me, temporarily lulled by the roving life of the circus, revived with added force. I felt that I must seek new adventures or die of intolerable boredom.

It was in Marseilles, staying in a dirty little tavern

near the harbour, where all the sailors, dockers, and ragged beachcombers drifted at night-time to loaf and drink, that this wanderlust was suddenly given an object, a goal. A chance meeting with an old Englishman, sunburned and wrinkled by long years spent in the tropics, aroused my curiosity and sent me off on a search that was destined to lead me into adventures, strange and horrifying, such as few men, I imagine, have ever experienced.

He was a queer man, this English traveller, his eyes startlingly blue in his brown face, his hair almost show-white, curling luxuriantly over his brows. He talked in little, jerky sentences, barking out the words as though he were biting off each one in turn, and he drank quantities of rum. These are the characteristics I remember him by—these and the dirty grey breeches, shantung jacket and ancient topi which he always wore. Never, even when indoors, did he appear without them.

When I first saw him he was stumbling up the stairs of the tavern, mumbling to himself drunk as a lord. As I passed, his bleary eyes took me in, and, momentarily put off his balance by the necessity to focus them anew, he clutched at me to steady himself.

"I want to go to bed," he muttered.

Not knowing which was his bedroom, for I had never set eyes on him before, I decided I had better take him to my room, where he could sleep off the effects of his drunkenness. Dumping him on the bed, I lay down on a rug and, despite the hog-like snores which were soon reverberating above me, fell sound asleep.

I was awakened by the sound of a low whistle from the bed. It was morning, the sun was shining through

the little lattice window in a dusty shaft, and my room-mate was sitting up in bed, perfectly sober, gazing with amazement at the object which hung on the wall in front of him.

"Where on earth did you get that?" he gasped, seeing that I was awake, and seeming to show no surprise at his unfamiliar surroundings.

I explained as briefly as I could how I had come by the mysterious Dried Head, and in response to his questions, told him all I knew about Sebah: how he had been a member—or so he had informed me—of a tribe of Africans who had their dwelling-place near the upper reaches of the River Congo, where it is called the Lualaba; how he had been employed by a white hunter to take part in an expedition to capture lions for menageries, and how they had taken six of the huge beasts; and how, when the expedition came successfully to an end, he was taken on board ship to look after the forest creatures he had helped to entrap.

"But as for the Head," I concluded, "I know nothing at all about it." And I recounted the tragedy which had brought the relic into my keeping. "I imagine it must be some souvenir of a past battle in the jungle, some valuable cannibal trophy, perhaps a sort of totem or talisman, which Sebah regarded almost as a god. Do you know anything about such things?"

He rolled off the bed and went up to the object under discussion, carefully releasing it from the hook on which I had hung it and gazing at it intently. His fingers, brown and blunt, explored it in a surprisingly gentle fashion. Then, with a sudden exclamation, he looked up at me.

" This is not the head of a black man ! " he cried. " It belongs to a white ! "

I stared at him in stupefaction.

" But it *must* be," I stuttered. " What would Sebah be doing with a white man's head ? He often told me that the lion-hunter was the only European he saw before he left Africa. And, at any rate, how do you know ? "

He was not listening. His brown hands were caressing the stretched skin gently, investigating the hollow sockets of the eyes, stroking the matted hair. He was absorbed in the task he had set himself, oblivious of my presence. At last he spoke.

" I have seen these things before," he said, as if to himself, " but never one like this. The nose is straight, do you see ? And the forehead prominent, whereas a negro has a broad, flat nose and a narrow, sloping skull. It looks as though it ought to belong to an Egyptian, but somehow the brow is too high and the face too square for that. Now, I wonder. . . ." His voice trailed away and suddenly his face lit up. He clutched my arm.

" Listen ! " he cried. " Have you ever heard the legend of the lost white tribe living in the middle of the African jungle, a mysterious race of men with pale skins and blue eyes ? It has been made the subject of tales and theories for years past. Supposing this head belongs to one of them ? Supposing, after all, they really do exist ? Why, if we can only prove it, we will become rich and famous ! We shall rank with the greatest scientists and explorers of the day ! " Then, as I said nothing, dumb before this flood of eloquence, amazed at the Englishmen's sudden excitement : " What part of Africa did you

say Sebah came from ? " he asked. " The Lualaba ? Well, what would you say to going up the Congo and trying to find out where he got this Head ? There must be some connection between the two."

" Don't be absurd ! " I burst out. " How can we expect to find one little tribe among all the huge forests of Central Africa ? I've spent many months there, and I know what I'm talking about. And even if we did find it, what makes you think they will reveal anything about the Dried Head ? Besides "— warming to my work—" you and I don't know each other. I may be a thief, for all you know ; and you may be a murderer. And, at any rate, it's all so uncertain."

When I had finished speaking, he smiled a little, came up to me and looked intently into my face. No trace of the night's debauch showed in his clear blue eyes.

" I am not a murderer," he said slowly, " and I don't think you are a thief. But although I have never seen you before, and don't even know why I am here in what is presumably your bedroom, I can tell one thing about you : you are as much a wanderer as I am. When you spoke of Africa just now, your face lit up ; there was a thrill in your voice. Yes, my son, you love Africa, and you will go there again."

He was certainly right about that. Ever since I had stood on the deck of a small trading steamer, watching the shore of the Dark Continent slowly receding from view, I had yearned to return, to taste once again those joys of freedom which I had known. But I wanted to go back, as I had gone the first time, alone, unhampered by the chains of

civilisation, to find companionship among the great beasts of the forest, not in search of a mythical white tribe, in the company of an almost total stranger.

Idly I picked up the Dried Head and ran my fingers over the leathery skin. It was strange, I thought, that this might once have belonged to the tribesman of a lost tribe, a tribe which to this day dwelt unknown in the heart of the African forests. The whole idea was fantastic in the extreme, sounding more like a romantic adventure story than a rumour with a possibility of genuine fact behind it. Yet in spite of myself, it thrilled me. I touched the matted hair on the scalp, and all at once, for some unknown reason, I seemed to see Sebah lying on the heap of dirty straw as he had before he died, the red marks of the lion on his breast, his eyes flickering feebly. At the same moment, as memory and imagination stirred in my brain, I heard the drums of Africa, evil, menacing, throbbing in my ears. And suddenly I knew that I must go back, must penetrate once more into those dark forests, where lurking beasts prowled for food, where snakes coiled in wait for the unwary wanderer, where natives performed their weird rites beneath the light of the moon. Africa had called to me, and I must answer.

Recklessly I turned to the Englishman.

" All right," I said. " I'll come with you."

We went down to the bar and drank rum to seal the agreement.

Now that I had definitely decided to make a second trip to Africa, I was all eagerness to be off; but, strangely enough, my fellow-traveller seemed to be in no hurry.

" We must arrange things properly," he told me.

" Find out all we can about the mysterious white race, and equip ourselves for the journey. The natives will expect presents in return for information."

I protested in vain that I had spent months in Africa with no equipment whatsoever, that although I had taken no gifts for the blacks, they had treated me as a god. He would not listen.

" We are going out with a definite purpose in view," he persisted. " And we must guard against all eventualities."

So I said no more.

During the next few weeks I was to see my blue-eyed Englishman almost continuously, but although he hardly ever stopped talking, I never managed to discover much about him. He seemed to have done most things: been a soldier in the Boer War, travelled in America, Australia, India; helped to take a windjammer round Cape Horn. He told me stories of the strange sights he had seen, and the queer people he had spoken to, that even threatened to rival my experiences among the Kings of the Jungle. But where he really came from, the source of his income, what he was doing in Marseilles: these queries were never answered. Even his name eluded me, until I asked him point-blank one day, and was requested to call him ' Jim.' If ever I managed to bring the conversation round to personal details of his life, he immediately twisted the talk into other channels so adroitly that I often came to the conclusion that he was nothing but a romancer with so vivid an imagination that in the end he had come to believe his tales were really true. And yet he seemed so certain of his subject, and the wander-

lust stirred so strongly in his veins, that I was reluctant to believe he was an impostor.

At length the time came when ' Jim ' decided that we were ready to depart. He had heard of a cargo boat leaving the port in a few weeks' time, which had for her ultimate destination Banana Point, at the mouth of the River Congo, and decided that she was the vessel for us. He went round to the bazaars and markets which abounded in the back streets of Marseilles, picking up cheap trinkets, toys, and lengths of shoddy material, as presents for the natives. He spent a whole day in bed, in order that his breeches and tussore coat could be cleaned in preparation for the journey. Even the famous topi was renovated with a liberal application of pipe-clay. After days of hurry and bustle, of arrangement and counter-arrangement, of argument and contradiction, the scene was set, the characters were ready, and the play was about to begin.

One voyage to Africa is very like another. I had been round the coast on a trading steamer before, and was no longer enthralled by the hordes of natives who came down to the shore at every port, yelling their wares and even splashing through the water and swarming up the ship's sides, in an effort to speed up their sales. As for ' Jim,' he remained in his cabin throughout the journey, drinking quantities of rum—he had laid in a good stock before leaving land—and reading intently from a dilapidated little book, called *The Lost Tribes of Africa*, or something similar, which he had picked up in a secondhand stall in the market at Marseilles. It seemed to absorb his whole attention, and I began to realize, that, unlike myself, he was taking our

expedition with deadly seriousness, that he believed implicitly that somewhere in the depths of the African jungle lived a race of men, the discovery of which would make his name famous and revered throughout the world.

As the west coast of Africa slowly began to glide by, my mind began to slip further and further into the past, back to that time when I had lived naked and alone among the mighty gorilla. How wonderful it would be to see again the splendid vegetation which Nature had scattered with such a lavish hand; to climb ape-like among the trailing lianas; once more to use a tree-bole for a bed; to hear again the call of the gorilla echoing among the vaulted tree-tops. When we passed the mouth of the Gaboon River, I leaned over the deck-rail and nearly wept with joy to be back again. Even 'Jim,' lured from his rum and his book by my ecstatic shouts, came up and stood beside me.

"You seem glad to be back, after all," he said.

I was too happy for words, but my delight must have shown in my face, for he thumped me boisterously on the back and then leant over the rail to spit with deadly aim at a piece of wood floating below.

"You wait till we have found that lost tribe," he exulted. "Then you'll have something to be glad about. Think of it, my boy—our names in all the papers; members of learned societies asking us to give lectures; invitations to dinner, to meet all the crowned heads of Europe! Why, Doctor Livingstone and Sir Henry Stanley won't be in the picture at all!"

I shook my head smilingly, protesting that I was

not looking for that kind of publicity; but nevertheless his enthusiasm was infectious. Despite my scepticism, I found my imagination stirred by the thought of the mysterious unknown race which we were setting off to find. Africa, I knew, hid many secrets in her vast, sunless forests. Already she had yielded up some of them to me. Why should this not be another of them, one which I was destined to reveal to the rest of mankind? When, therefore, a few days later, we sailed into the mouth of the great Congo River, which stretched three thousand miles up into the heart of Africa, and dropped anchor at the low, sandy peninsula of Banana Point, I could scarcely contain my excitement. One of the greatest adventures of my life was about to begin.

CHAPTER V

IN THE CLUTCH OF THE CANNIBALS

DIRECTLY we landed at Banana Point we set about chartering a canoe to take us up the river to Stanley Falls. It was not a difficult task. Now that Europe had discovered the potentialities of Africa, the natives were quick to see their advantages, and hordes of them came clustering round us, asking in a mixture of sign language and guttural broken English, if we were looking for a 'boy.' We were able to hire twenty paddlers, a man to act as our servant, who told us that his name was Gayzah, and a fine large canoe, without any trouble at all. Within two hours of landing everything was fixed up. We dumped our belongings in the bottom of the boat and started on our journey.

At this time the Congo Free State was being exploited for all it was worth by the Belgian Government. Stations had been made all along the river, in order to facilitate the collection and carriage of ivory, roads and railways were being built, and the country was generally being opened up as quickly as possible. Before, when I had entered the forest by no recognized route, but had landed in a lonely part of the coast and made my way unaccompanied into the gloomy interior, I had felt as though I were casting

all civilization aside, was entering a land where Nature ruled supreme ; but now, gliding peacefully and efficiently over the brown waters of the Congo, such a wide river that the opposite bank was scarcely visible, seeing at every station the figures of white men—soldiers, traders, government officials—all as casual and matter-of-fact as though they were in a European city, I began to think that the Dark Continent no longer held any mystery. The wild and savage heart of Africa was being slowly tamed by the fetters of civilization, and the thought did not please me.

At sight of the river steamers, so opulent and modern compared to our primitive native canoe, and the prim brick buildings at Boma, the capital of the Congo Free State, Matadi, Leopoldville, and Bolobo, each of which we passed in turn, my heart sank still further.

" We shall never find a lost tribe here," I grumbled to ' Jim.' " The whole continent seems to have been laid open. Even the birds have flown away, and as for the gorilla—they must all have been shot long ago."

He nodded his head a trifle gloomily, and turned to his inevitable consolation—rum.

" Still, the scenery is pretty good," he said, taking a long pull at the bottle, and wiping his lips appreciatively when he had done so, " and the natives seem good enough fellows. It does seem a bit tame, though. From your descriptions I imagined we would step straight off the boat into a land of mystery and romance."

" Yes, it is a bit tame here," I agreed.

It was perhaps fortunate that we could not see into

the future, and had no conception of the maelstrom of events into which we were about to be drawn. One moment Africa was calm and safe, a sort of luxurious summer holiday resort, with a broad, smoothly-flowing river on whose brown waters we sailed serenely. The next moment it had become a hideous nightmare of yelling demons, whose poisoned arrows and slender spears rained down upon us like a shower of red-hot needles. Often in the course of that canoe trip, I had groaned against the encroachment of civilization. Now I was to recall those European stations, those white-clad figures, as something inexpressibly dear, something which I never expected to look upon again.

We had reached Stanley Falls, and after consultation with the Governor, who received our statement that we were naturalists with a quizzical expression on his face, but made no actual comment, decided to paddle up the main branch of the Congo, known as the Lualaba River, the river on whose bank Sebah had lived with his tribe. But we could get no paddlers. Our team of twenty flatly refused to go beyond the Falls, requested their pay, and were soon skimming back over the river the way they had come, and attempts to hire a new boat met with a like reception. All the blacks at Stanleyville shook their heads when, through Gayzah, I asked them if they would be willing to take a canoe up the river, and chattered excitedly together in the vernacular, with much excitement and flourish of hands. In his curious English, Gayzah told me the reason.

" That is a bad river," he said, " and bad men live on its shores. Not men like us," he touched himself proudly on the chest, " the friends of the white men ;

but men who eat you and cut off your heads. No one of us will venture along it except in a steamboat, and with a gun."

I felt ' Jim ' nudging my arm.

" Do you hear that ? " he whispered. " He says that they eat men and *cut off their heads !* That seems more like it, my boy. It is the heads that interest us."

Nevertheless, in spite of our efforts, we were unable to hire a single paddler. It was only with the utmost difficulty, and with the added inducement of double pay, that we could persuade even Gayzah to accompany us. In the end, so sure was my companion that we were on the track of the lost tribe, we bought a small canoe, loaded it with as much baggage as it would hold, and set off, the three of us paddling in turn.

In contrast to the Congo, the Lualaba was not much more than three-quarters of a mile wide, and at each bank was overhung with trees and mangrove bushes. The water was dark and sluggish, and sometimes as we paddled slowly along, none of us except the black man being particularly adept at the task, the grey shape of a crocodile or a hippopotamus would loom up in front of us. At sight of the former, Gayzah would shrink into the canoe, terror in his face. A brother of his, he told us, had once been eaten by a crocodile, pulled in dreadful agony below the surface of the water ; and ever since that time a glimpse of one of the hideous reptiles, lurking with gaping jaws, had filled him with the most overwhelming terror. Even though he professed to be a Christian, he continued to regard them as devils, as the spirits of his dead enemies thirsting

for his blood as they had thirsted for his brother's, and whenever one of them approached the boat, he dropped his paddle to cover his face with trembling hands. The hippos, on the other hand, he looked upon as friendly beasts, as indeed they were, and if we passed a herd of them basking in the sun, their noses scarcely visible above the surface of the muddy water, their small eyes blinking sleepily, he threw sticks at them, chuckling with delight, and called them his ' big brothers of the swamp.'

So for a time we continued up the river, stopping every now and then to pick fruit—plantains, wild berries and bananas—to use as food. From past experience I knew which plants were edible, and Gayzah, too, had a wide knowledge of forest flora, so there was no danger of starvation. ' Jim,' it is true, had wanted to take a supply of concentrated food with us, " in case " as he put it, " anything happens " ; but I had put my foot down firmly, refusing this sop to civilization, and so far my confidence in the forest had not been misplaced.

There was a strange stillness about that sluggish river. Occasionally we passed water-holes, places stamped by the tread of countless animals into a pathway where the beasts of the forest came down night after night to drink ; and from time to time as we skimmed by, shy creatures slipped back into the shelter of the trees, making scarcely a sound as the branches closed over them. Occasionally, too, we saw a black face peering for a second through the woven creepers, to watch our passing. But for the most part we were surrounded by a thick wall of silence and isolation. The impenetrable undergrowth cut us off—or seemed to do so—from the

teeming life of the forest. The ceaseless hum of innumerable winged insects, and the steady plop of the paddle in the water, were the only sounds we could hear, except for the occasional harsh screech of a bird, or the cough of a monkey, echoing eerily above us. But for these, we might have been alone in the whole vast continent of Africa.

But we were not alone. Although we did not know it at the time, eyes had been watching us, intently and sleeplessly, almost as soon as we had embarked at Stanley Falls and begun our voyage up the Lualaba River. An invisible bodyguard had been keeping pace with us in utter silence along the bank, hidden in the creeping vines and lianas, their tread stifled by the thick carpet of decayed vegetation that covered the ground, their black, shining bodies camouflaged by the glancing light and shade of the forest. Perhaps Gayzah unconsciously felt their menacing presence, for he shivered once or twice and looked fearfully towards the interior; but when I asked him the reason he just shrugged his shoulders in the stoical way that natives have, and answered that it was nothing, so I pursued the matter no further.

At length we reached some rapids, where the water, rushing furiously over the rocks and sending great clouds of foam high into the air, effectively barred our progress. We had to make a portage. Reaching the shore, we scrambled out of the canoe, and carrying it as best we could between us, made for the calm water on the other side of the falls. It was slow going, for the boat was heavy, besides being filled with our numerous belongings, and neither 'Jim' nor I were particularly adept at the job

but we struggled on, stopping for frequent rests and mopping our streaming brows as we did so.

The roar of the rapids sounded in our ears like distant, regular thunder, like the continuous rumble of a hundred guns, so that it was not exactly surprising that no suspicious noises came to us from the forest. Besides, the sun shone so calmly through the branches, and the birds sang so sweetly, that everything seemed at peace. Not a leaf seemed to be stirring on the trees. Yet, unconscious of it though we were, danger lurked near, ready to pounce upon us. Suddenly, as we heaved the canoe along, there was a succession of short, sharp little sounds, as of a woodpecker plying his business among the trees; I felt a prick, like that of a red-hot needle, in my left arm; and then, simultaneously, there came a yell from 'Jim,' the full weight of the canoe rested for a second on my hands, and, unable to sustain it, I let the boat drop with a crash to the ground.

When the dust had cleared away, I turned round to see 'Jim' dancing round like a mad thing, yelling at the top of his voice, his hand clasped over his left eye, the brow of which was streaming with blood.

"God, Jeuan!" he shrieked. "Some damned insect has stung me. It must be a hornet at least!"

He rubbed his eye frantically, until all at once he ceased his efforts and looked at me with a puzzled expression on his face. He held out something in his hand. The blood trickled slowly down his cheek and dropped off his chin.

"It wasn't an insect in my eye," he said. "It was *this*. What on earth can it be?"

Lying in the palm of his hand was a little piece

of yellowish wood, about two inches long, sharpened to a delicate point at one end. At the base, which was slightly flattened and wider than the rest, a few notches had been cut. I knew at once what it was. It was a dart, one of the deadliest weapons of the African native.

" Why . . . ! " I stammered. " Where did that come from ? "

I looked towards the gloomy interior of the forest, but no sound came from it. Only away to the right came the thunder of the rapids, deadening any noise that might have been. All at once I remembered Gayzah, and turned to speak to him. To my amazement, he was crouching in the shadow of the canoe, trembling all over, a look of such abject terror on his face that my heart misgave me. To add to my disquiet, I saw that the side of the overturned canoe was peppered all over with dozens of those same little slender pieces of wood. This, then, was the explanation of those strange, woodpecker sounds I had heard.

" Why, Gayzah, what is the matter ? " I asked.

He shrank back still further as I approached him.

" It is the cannibals," he murmured. " They have come for us. They want to eat us. We might as well jump into the river now and be eaten by the crocodiles." Suddenly his eyes widened in horror and he pointed behind me with a trembling finger. " Look, Master, here they come ! "

I looked round, and my blood froze with horror. Out from the trees, advancing in a closely formed band, huge wickerwork shields on their arms, spears aloft in their hands, came an army of black warriors. Their faces were set in horrible grimaces and, from

what I could see at that distance, gashed across the cheek-bones in long, gaping scars. Their bodies, clad only in a thin strip of tawny, spotted skin, gleamed in the sunlight. In front, urging them on, was a figure so grotesque and hideous that I knew at once what position he held : he was the Witch Doctor, the most powerful man of any African tribe, the creature who by the mere raising of his hand can order the death of any of his subjects.

My past experience among African natives had taught me a great deal about so-called Medicine Men, and I had thought myself inured to their unpleasing appearance ; but the object now approaching me was different from any other Witch Doctor I had seen. Instead of being short and emaciated, as most of them are, with bones sticking skeleton-like through the wasted black flesh, he was gigantic, literally towering above his followers, none of whom was more than averagely tall. To exaggerate his stature still more, he wore on his head a mask, somewhat resembling that of a wolf, with jaws curling upwards in a baleful grin, and short, upstanding ears, tufted with coarse yellow hairs. His finely-proportioned body was covered from neck to knees with scars, ranging from an inch to half a foot long, some of them stained with red and yellow dye, and puckered into a dozen different shapes. A curling design in pipe-clay ornamented his chest. In his hand he carried a slender flail of feathers.

Slowly the strange black battalion marched nearer, their shields clashing together as they strode forward, their tall spears gleaming. Somewhere away in the distance sounded the throb of a tom-tom, regular

and insistent. The roar of the waterfall seemed to take on a menacing note. I felt rooted to the spot and could not stir.

A low whistle at my side reminded me that 'Jim' was as stupefied as I was at this amazing apparition advancing towards us.

"My God, Jeuan," he muttered, his sense of humour never absent for long, "what is it? A fancy-dress party?"

"It's likely to be a damn sight more exciting than that," I said curtly. "These natives don't look exactly friendly, do they? We had better get out some of the stuff from the boat, to pacify them."

I turned to the canoe as I spoke, but the Witch Doctor was too quick for me. He gave a sharp command, and immediately half a dozen of his warriors had slipped round behind us, cutting off our retreat to the boat. 'Jim,' who in common with most white men in Africa for the first time, refused to take the natives seriously, protested loudly and vigorously. There was another bark from that queerly-masked figure, and 'Jim' found his arms pinioned to his side by a couple of stalwart blacks. A spear prodded in the small of his back warned him that resistance was useless.

I felt that it was time I took a hand in the proceedings, and calling Gayzah I told him to ask the Witch Doctor what exactly he wanted with us and how he dared hinder two white men. In halting Bantu, his voice trembling so much that he could hardly get out the words, he did as I bade him. But the result was scarcely favourable. With a sound that resembled a snort more than anything else, the African brushed aside the quaking interpreter as

though he were a fallen leaf, shook his plumed whip violently in his hand so that a few red feathers drifted to the ground, and came striding up to us. He uttered another curt order, and three more warriors pounced upon me and wrenched my arms behind my back, twisting them high up and binding them with a stout thong, so that I nearly yelled with the pain. Then, casually, with a sort of regal nonchalance, he strolled up to Gayzah, where he lay shuddering on the ground, and spoke a few guttural words.

The effect on the kneeling figure was electric. With a shriek he leaped to his feet, his face a black mask of terror, and before any of the warriors could stop him he had raced across the bank to the river. For a second he hesitated on the brink and then, without a backward glance, he dived into the brown waters, where they flowed calmly and swiftly above the whirling rapids.

He began swimming strongly against the current, in a diagonal direction to avoid being carried down to the Falls, making for the opposite shore. Then, all at once, as we watched, we saw an ominous dark shape loom up in front of his half-submerged form. There was a sudden wild threshing, a shrill, agonized scream, and then, horrified, we saw him being drawn below the water. A scaly tail showed momentarily ; a few ripples curdled the placid surface of the river ; and then all was as before. What Gayzah had dreaded most, had come to pass. The crocodiles had claimed another victim.

' Jim ' and I looked at each other, horrified at the tragic drama that had been enacted before our eyes within the space of less than two minutes. The

same thought seemed to have crossed both our minds simultaneously. What message had the Witch Doctor given to Gayzah, a message so terrible that he had braved the crocodiles rather than remain in his captor's clutches ? Had he been threatened with some horrible fate, a fate that was awaiting us, too ?

We were not given much time for speculation, however. Seeming to dismiss Gayzah's death as a matter of no importance, the Witch Doctor rapped out an order. Immediately some of the warriors bent down beside the canoe and hoisted it on their shoulders. Others of the black band also stepped forward and laid their hands none too gently on ' Jim's ' shoulders and mine. Spears digging into our backs urged us forward. In a long line, led by the grotesque figure of the Witch Doctor, we plunged into the gloom of the forest.

CHAPTER SIX

THROUGH THE FOREST

THE forest was as dark as night. The huge trees—mahoganies, ebonies, cedars, acacias —their trunks stretching skywards for several hundreds of feet, effectively blocked out any of the sunlight, and where perhaps a little might have penetrated, the crawling lianas wove their fleshy tentacles and made the screen doubly thick. Underfoot, decaying vegetation formed a hateful carpet for us to tread on, the pulpy squelch of leaves and the snap of dry twigs and branches following almost every step. The stench, too, was nauseating, and this, together with the atmosphere, dank and steamy, made walking almost unbearable. Sweat ran down us in streams, until our clothes were saturated. I was used to the airless, enclosed feeling that an African forest gives one, and could stand it better, but ' Jim,' despite his travels, never seemed to have encountered anything quite like it before, and soon he was groaning painfully, and gasping for breath.

I had no knowledge of our destination, of course, or of the direction in which we were going, though from what I knew of the African natives, I gathered that we were being taken back to their village. From the slow, deliberate gait of the black warriors

I decided that the distance must be a considerable one. Had the village been close by, they would probably have hurried to get there before the fall of night.

In the gloomy depths of the forest it was difficult to tell if evening were approaching, but as the sunlight gradually ceased to filter through the glades which our path occasionally crossed, I came to the conclusion that twilight was descending. There seemed, too, a subtle change in the atmosphere of the place. It was waking up after its daylong sleep. Sounds came from the tangled undergrowth, the scutter of feet, the wail of a hungry leopard, and once, about a hundred yards away to the left of the track, the crash of a heavy body for a moment caused the two warriors at my side to stop and listen intently. But the creature, whether elephant, leopard, or even gorilla, made no attempt to attack us—forest animals rarely fight except when they are afraid or hungry—and soon the noise died away in the distance and we continued on our way.

The journey seemed interminable. I was so tired that I could have dropped with fatigue and slept where I lay on the earth, while ' Jim,' from what I could see of him in front, was stumbling along in an almost half-conscious condition. Just when it seemed as though I had reached the limit of my endurance, we emerged into a glade, larger than any we had yet crossed, carpeted with bright turf and fringed with clusters of the loveliest pale purple orchids I had ever seen.

The vanguard had already arrived, and was busy, with whittled sticks, making a circle of fire in the centre of the clearing. The canoe, with all our

belongings, was lying a little way off. The Witch Doctor was nowhere to be seen.

The tropical moon had now risen above the trees and was flooding down into the clearing. A dozen little fires flickered and glowed like a sort of magic circle. The warriors sat about in little groups, within the shelter of the flames, talking occasionally, rubbing their spear-heads with a kind of soft, juicy bark to clean them, and chewing leaves and spitting out the pithy parts into the fires, where they hissed for a second and caused the flame to burn greenly. ' Jim ' and I, meanwhile, our hands still bound behind our backs, our legs loosely tied together with thin strands of raw hide, lay also within the shadow of the burning circle, protected from prowling beasts, not, as I afterwards realized, out of kindness on the part of the blacks, but because we were too valuable to expose to such danger.

We spoke together softly.

" What do you think it is all about ? " ' Jim ' whispered. " Where do you suppose they are taking us ? " He cursed softly as one of the thongs bit deep into his wrist and began to stop the blood from circulating. " Is there any chance of escape, do you think ? "

I straightened one of my legs as best I could, to relieve the feeling of cramp that was beginning to attack my muscles, and immediately one of the warriors arose with a guttural exclamation and prodded me with his spear, as if to make sure I was still secure. When he had sat down again by the fire, his black back shining like polished ebony in the leaping light of the flames, I answered ' Jim's ' question.

" It looks to me," I muttered, " as though we are being taken back to their village. But what will happen to us when we get there, Heaven alone knows. From Gayzah's terror, it looks as though it may be something pretty drastic. And that old Witch Doctor —I don't trust him. They are all alike, those Medicine Men ; all terribly jealous and terribly anxious to show off their power and keep the confidence of the tribe. Even now he may be thinking out plans for our death."

I little knew then, lying on the soft grass of the glade, trying to find in my cramped, trussed-up position some small comfort, how true my words would prove.

For about four hours we rested there, presumably in order to gain strength for the continuance of the march. The natives did not sleep : they sat motionless, like great carven statues, sunk into a strange torpor, as still as the moonlight shining down upon them ; only occasionally one of them would rise, his shadow following him gigantically, to put a little more fuel on the fire, after which he would sink back to the ground again, grunting from his exertions.

I, too, could not sleep. The strange thrill I felt, to be once more back in the midst of the vast, primeval forest, cut off again from civilization, together with the uncomfortable position in which I was forced to lie, made slumber impossible. I watched, therefore, with wide eyes, as the moon sailed majestically over the tree-tops, tipping their leaves with silver, drinking in all the beauty of the tropic night. Once I thought I surprised two green eyes gleaming out of the darkness away to the right, beyond the circle of fire ; but the leopard—if leopard it was—knew

too well the nature of the flames that flickered between him and his purposed prey, and he did not attempt any attack. Instead, with a little coughing snarl, as he plunged at some scuttling rodent in the undergrowth and missed his mark, he turned and slipped back into the gloom.

When the pitchy darkness of night was gradually fading into the grey of dawn, I saw a tall figure appear on the edge of the clearing and stand for a moment surveying the scene before him. It was the Witch Doctor, still wearing his bestial mask, the plumed whip still in his hand. Curtly he spoke to his followers, and at his words the crouching circle of men started into life. Jumping up, they proceeded to stamp out the fires, carefully raking them over so that no spark was left, and then, pulling ' Jim ' and me roughly to our feet and unshackling our legs, they once more formed themselves into a long file and began to march.

Later, I found out why the Witch Doctor had absented himself from the clearing during the four hours we remained there. He was ' acting his part.' Each of the African Medicine Men has his own particular ' talent,' whether it is for smelling out devils, curing the sick, or making powerful *ju-jus*. He must have one accepted channel in which he is supreme and unchallenged among his tribe. The power of our Witch Doctor, I was to discover, lay in the fact that he was supposed by all his followers to have the soul of a gorilla.

It was a strange story, one which I was to learn later from M'bopa, a member of the tribe, who afterwards became my travelling companion. About five years before, the Witch Doctor had been killed

by an army of raiders, clubbed on the head while defending his holy temple, so that he died soon afterwards. Various youths and young men, said to be imbued with magic powers, aspired to step into his shoes, and—rather unusually—the elders of the tribe decided to hold a sort of competition to decide which of them had most claim to the coveted position.

As soon as the dead man's body had been thrown to the crocodiles, the competition was begun. Here my informant grew a little hazy, and it was obvious to me that he had a wholesome respect for Witch Doctors and did not intend to rouse their anger. However, he described some of the efforts of the unsuccessful candidates—how they walked round the circle of spectators, smelling out evil spirits, foretelling deaths, pronouncing curses and taboos—and then went on to tell me of the crowning performance of the day. He made no attempt to account for the phenomenon, only outlining it to me just as it happened.

As all the spectators were watching the performance with breathless interest, so he continued, suddenly to their consternation a huge gorilla appeared at the far end of the village. No one moved as it shambled slowly forward. All at once, just as it had come within a few yards of the first petrified native, it stopped dead in its tracks, stumbled, and rolled over on to the ground, while, as though from its dead body, there stepped out into full view a man, one of the candidates, a living man emerging from a dead ape.

After that the election of this remarkable man was never in doubt. It seemed to the credulous,

gullible natives like a manifestation from Heaven: there lived among them a man who was half an ape, a brother to the great beasts of the jungle, the Kings of the Forest; he was obviously the Witch Doctor for them. And so the new magician stepped into the shoes of the old without a murmur from anyone, even the unsuccessful competitors.

"It must have been a trick, of course it must," I said to the native, when he had finished his tale. "He was wearing the gorilla's skin all the time, or was carrying it, dead, in front of him."

The native refused to be drawn. He knew too well the power of the Witch Doctor and what it could do to him. He shook his head doubtfully, and would say no more.

So with this strange, cunning man at our head, we continued the march.

'Jim' was the first of us to reach the end of his tether. Despite the adventures which he professed to have undergone in most corners of the world, he did not seem very well able to endure hardships. True, the night had been a particularly unpleasant one, trussed up as we had been in a cramped position, our hands bent behind us and our legs twisted; but after about quarter of an hour's march I had ceased to have any unpleasant feelings of cramp. 'Jim,' on the other hand, began to stumble pitifully. Frequent prods with a spear-point had little effect, save to increase his groans, and soon the warriors devised a means—borrowed from their enemies, the slave-traders of Arabia—to deal with him.

They cut down an acacia branch, smooth and straight and forked sharply at both ends, placed one

end round my neck and the other round ' Jim's ', and so chained us together. Incidentally, I was in front, and so had the whole of ' Jim's ' weight to carry. Whenever he stumbled, the movement rubbed the wood against my neck, jarring me horribly. Whenever he lagged behind—and fixed as I was, I could not turn round to see if he were weakening—I had to drag him on. I could look neither to the right nor the left. My neck was rasped at both sides by the grip of the fork, so that each step was torture. I longed for a drink to cool my parched tongue. The march became a nightmare, hideous, interminable, and I could scarcely credit my eyes when, after what seemed to be a period of over twelve hours, the forest thinned a little, to reveal a well-trodden path. At the end of it, in the largest clearing I had yet seen, stood a native village.

African villages vary a great deal according to the different tribes who inhabit them. Gaboon natives, for instance, weave their huts of straw and lalang grass into the shape of a cone, making a small hole half-way up the structure serve as the only door. The Banyari, living near the Albert Nyanza, shape theirs like bee-hives. Other negroes, having their homes within the great bend of the River Congo, built regular rows of houses, with pillars to support the roofs, or fashion big communal dwellings, where several families live together. According to the occupation of the natives, whether farmers, hunters, or fishermen, the huts are intended to last a long time or to serve as merely temporary refuges. Hunters like the pygmies, a nomadic race who wander through the forest without a settled home, use a few branches pulled down around them

as shelters against the weather. Men who have planted fields of plantain and banana, on the other hand, and must dwell beside them, build strong huts, walled with clay and gable-roofed, and even make gardens round them, or enclosed yards at the back, where the women have their hearths and do their cooking.

The village into which we were now marching consisted, as far as I could see from my cramped position, of about three hundred huts, rectangular in shape and about seven feet high, with wooden walls laced with plantain leaves, and grass roofs. Around it, separating the clearing from the surrounding forest, was a palisade made of pointed wooden spikes, their tops as sharp as a spear-head. A rough brushwood gate had been drawn back from a space in the palisade, and through this, in a long file, we marched.

The village seemed to be deserted. No one was about. No women came chattering from the houses to gape at us. No children poked at us with curious fingers. The Witch Doctor had disappeared. Slowly, the beaten earth shaking beneath their heavy tread, the warriors marched forward, ' Jim ' and I in the midst of them, until we reached a hut set a little apart from the others, its leafy sides daubed with clay, its roof thickly thatched so that not one chink of light could penetrate the interior.

Here the warriors halted, forming themselves into a rough semicircle round us. Two of them stepped forward and removed the wooden shackle from our necks. Then roughly, with spear-points digging unpleasantly deep into our backs, we were urged forward into the hut. Our hands were still bound

behind us ; leather thongs were tied loosely round our legs to prevent us from escaping ; and then we were left in the darkness, our nostrils filled with an indescribably horrible smell, to await the next move of the cannibals.

CHAPTER SEVEN

A GRUESOME BANQUET

FOR a time ' Jim ' and I lay in the hut without saying a word. Our hands were still tied behind us, and mine, at any rate, had almost ceased to have any feeling in them, but our necks were free at last from the dreadful, rasping fork which had enclosed them, and the relief was very great. I twisted mine luxuriously from side to side and rejoiced at the feeling of freedom. Unaccountably, in spite of the gloomy surroundings, my spirits rose.

The darkness was absolute. There was no single cranny in the mud walls, and I could see literally not one inch in front of my face, while the stench which arose from the floor was nauseating in the extreme. Native hygiene at its best is somewhat primitive, but the Lualaba cannibals seemed to possess no idea of cleanliness at all.

At last ' Jim ' spoke. His voice, in contrast to its usual briskness, was weak and quavering. He seemed to be making a tremendous effort to make himself heard.

" What are they going to do with us ? " he murmured. " Shall we have to remain in this filthy place for long ? Whatever possessed us to come ? " Then, fretfully : " It's so hot, Jeuan.

Can't you get them to give me some water ? It's so hot, and my head aches. It feels as though it's on fire."

I soothed him as best I could—refraining from telling him that the journey to Africa had been his idea entirely—but it was not very easy to be comforting in the pitchy darkness, bound hand and foot as I was. His panting, noisy breath alarmed me, and I wondered if he were in the throes of a jungle fever. Suddenly, as I was wondering how best to calm him, a sound came to my ears—a low, familiar, haunting sound—the throbbing of a drum.

It began as though in the distance, regular, monotonous, incessant, a faint, rumbling sound like the mutter of distant thunder ; but soon, as the drummer warmed to his task, it grew louder and louder, more and more menacing, until it seemed to be all around us, echoing in every nook and cranny of the hut, making the very air vibrate. '*Tadada! Tadada! Tadada!*' went its anapaestic rhythm, stronger and stronger, until my head was filled with the noise and I felt as though it would burst.

As for 'Jim'—it seemed to take away the last shred of his self-control. I heard him rolling over and over on the muddy floor of our prison, trying vainly to shut out the insistent, nerve-racking sound ; and then suddenly he let out a wild shriek.

"Stop it ! Make them stop it ! " he screamed. "It is sending me mad ! Make them stop it, Jeuan ! "

"Be quiet ! " I said sharply, thinking that firmness might succeed where sympathy had failed. "You will bring them all in here if you aren't careful."

But he was beyond heeding any advice from me. As I had feared, he was in the grip of some jungle

fever, and sane thinking or reasoning was for the time being quite beyond his powers. He continued to shout and scream at the top of his voice, trying with his cries to drown the threatening note of the drum, until I began to wonder why the whole tribe did not rush into the hut to discover the reason for the din. The throbbing of the drum continued, mingled with ' Jim's ' screams, which grew gradually fainter as his strength decreased, until all at once the thick coconut-matting curtain which served as a door to the hut was roughly pulled aside, and in the sudden light which flooded into the interior from what looked like a huge bonfire outside, I saw a gigantic figure towering over me.

The Witch Doctor—for he it was who had entered the hut—did not speak, realizing no doubt that we would not have understood him even if he had. He just stood where he was in the doorway, one hand on the curtain, looking down at ' Jim ' and me as we lay there. When, after a brief pause, ' Jim ' began muttering again to himself, tossing to and fro on the floor and shouting wildly in his delirium, he uttered a sharp exclamation, and immediately a warrior came in, carrying in his hand a pine-wood flare.

The torch lit up the interior of our prison, and for the first time I was able to see the place in which for the past few hours we had been lying. It was not a particularly edifying sight. The walls were of leaves, smeared over roughly with a greyish clay, which clung in patches here and there. The roof, across which the flaring torch sent long, leaping shadows, was dank with decayed vegetation and seemed to be the home of countless insects and

small, slimy things, for from time to time one of them would fall like a drop of water on to my face or hands, sending a shudder of horror through me. But worst of all, was the floor. Almost ankle-deep in mud and slime, it was covered with refuse of all kinds, so thick and evil-smelling that, although I had been lying on it for many hours now, I tried to rise and remove myself from its filthy contact.

Taking the torch from his warrior-servant, the Witch Doctor stepped forward and bent over the recumbent form of my companion. A sudden draught from outside sent the flame swirling wildly as he did so, and his huge shadow leapt up towards the roof, black and menacing, seeming to fill the whole hut with its terrifying presence. This time he was not wearing his animal mask and I saw that his face, ebony in the torchlight, was gashed into a hundred hideous scars. Whorl upon whorl of them puckered his cheeks, and set a perpetual frown upon his forehead, while through his lower lip, which protruded unpleasantly, was stuck an ivory pin, like the fang of a sabre-toothed tiger, giving him an appearance of alarming ferocity.

He bent over ' Jim,' and was evidently pleased with what he saw in my friend's fever-flushed face, for he drew back his lips in a snarling grin. As he did so I saw that both his incisor teeth had been filed to sharp points—a sure sign, so I had heard, of cannibalism. Then, ignoring me completely, he rapped out some order to his retainer, handed him the still flaring torch, and the two men went out of the hut. The fibre curtain swung to behind them, and we were once more left alone in the darkness.

I lost all count of time as I lay in the hut, although

vaguely I imagined that night must have fallen outside, for I could sense a strange stillness in the atmosphere, which even the incessant rumble of the drum could not disturb. Rather, it seemed to enhance it. ' Jim ' seemed to have sunk into a coma. He no longer screamed in delirium, but from his laboured breathing and occasional muttered exclamations I guessed that he was still in the throes of the fever. Painfully I managed to crawl over to him, through the filth of the floor, but with my hands tied behind me there was little I could do for him, and I felt almost thankful that he was unconscious. At length I must have fallen asleep, in spite of my uncomfortable position, the steady beat of the tom-tom still throbbing through my brain.

Dreams are a pleasant refuge from the unpleasantness of reality, and for a few brief hours, at any rate, in that cannibal village, I forgot the dreadful plight in which ' Jim ' and I were placed and returned to my old life in the travelling circus. I can recall that dream as vividly as though it happened yesterday. I was standing in the cage with my two chimpanzees, feeding them with sunflower seeds and scratching their shaggy shoulders, when Jules rushed into the booth.

" Jeuan ! " he shouted. " The King of England is coming to see you ! "

Then, seizing the big drum with which he attracted custom to his show, he began to beat it, shouting as he did so : " Walk up ! Walk up ! To see the wild beasts of Africa ! Walk up, *Mesdames, Messieurs !* "

Louder and louder he beat the drum, until the noise of it seemed to fill the whole tent and I began

to fear that it would frighten the monkeys, louder and louder, when all at once I woke with a start to find myself lying on the floor of the cannibal hut, blinking in a shaft of sunlight that came in through the uncurtained doorway. Outside, still part of my vanished dream, a tom-tom throbbed loudly, while inside, ranged round the walls of the hut, stood a circle of warriors, spears in their hands and wide white grins on their faces.

As I watched drowsily, I saw three of them step forward, bend down and lift up ' Jim's ' unconscious form. His face, in the shaft of bright light, was pale and drawn, his white hair was damp with sweat, and matted, his mouth hung a little open. They began to carry him outside.

I tried to rise then, and started to shout at the warriors to leave ' Jim ' alone, but they completely ignored me. I might just as well not have been there, for all the notice they took of me. Without so much as a sideways glance, they filed out of the hut, taking the helpless form of ' Jim ' with them, and left me alone with my thoughts.

Never before had I felt so entirely helpless. Although he was years older than me, I felt a sort of responsibility towards ' Jim.' True, it had been his own idea to come to Africa in search of the Lost Tribe, but through my previous experience in the forests of the Dark Continent and my ability to speak Arabic—a language understood by a few of the natives—the leadership of the expedition seemed to have devolved upon me. Now, responsible though I felt for him, I was forced to watch the blacks carry him away, to what fate I knew not, and I could do nothing.

A crowd of villagers seemed to have collected outside the hut, for my ears caught the sound of voices and the patter of naked feet on the beaten soil. Loud shouts from somewhere in the distance mingled with shrill feminine screams, and then, as the warriors emerged carrying their burden between them, the low noise swelled to an excited roar. I felt I must see what was going on, and gradually I managed to crawl over to the doorway and peer through a chink in the matting.

At first I could see nothing. A forest of black legs, many of them with bright metal anklets encircling them, effectively obscured my vision and left me cursing. Then suddenly the drum began to beat once more. At its insistent rhythm the line of natives in front of me began slowly to beat time with their feet. From side to side they swayed, faster and faster as the drummer speeded up his strokes, clapping their hands together and thumping with their heels upon the ground, until all at once they had begun to dance round in a circle, with a queer, quick double-shuffle of their feet, uttering wild, high-pitched yells as they did so.

Now at last I was able to peer through the stamping black legs and see what lay in the middle of the dancing-ground. The sight that met my eyes froze me with a horror so great that, bound as I was, I managed to scramble through the door of the hut out into the daylight, where I fell sprawling, not three feet from the circle of dancing, yelling natives.

In the middle of the clearing was a tree-stump, about six feet high, brown and polished to the smoothness of ivory ; and lashed against it, his body

so still that I thought he must be already dead, was ' Jim.' Down towards his bound, motionless form a young, springy sapling had been bent, so that from the outside of the circle to the centre it made an arch beneath which the dancers passed, while its leafy top was tied to the head of my poor defenceless friend. The strain on his neck must have been terrific, for the sapling was continually trying to spring back into place, while ' Jim's ' bonds kept him firmly tied to the stake, and I thanked God that he was unconscious and therefore out of pain.

I racked my brains to think of some way in which I could help my friend to escape from his terrible plight, but I could think of nothing. I was able scarcely to move, and my cries—for I shouted wildly at the top of my voice, in order to attract attention—were drowned in the beat of the drum and the stamp of a hundred feet. Sick with fear, and yet unable to take my eyes from the pitiful figure of my helpless comrade, I waited for the climax to this strange and horrible rite, a climax which I felt would soon be reached.

It came sooner than I expected. Gradually the dancing of the negroes became more and more frenzied, their yells wilder, and then all at once, as though by some common consent, they came to a dead stop and stood quivering, sweat running down their naked bodies from their exertions. Just in front of me there was a clear space among their ranks, so that I could look right to the centre of the clearing, and as I watched I saw the Witch Doctor appear and sidle slowly towards the tree-trunk where ' Jim ' was lashed.

The lupine mask was once more over his face and a

skirt of brilliant-coloured feathers was slung round his waist, so that they nodded and swayed with his every movement. Different bright clays seemed to have been rubbed into the scars on his breast and shoulders. Round his legs, from knee to ankle, was a collection of shining bracelets. In his hand was the plumed flail.

Horrified and yet fascinated, I watched this hideous apparition as with a slow, crouching stride, the feathers of his skirt writhing round him like the tentacles of some gigantic octopus, he crept forward and peered into ' Jim's ' unconscious face. When he had done so he nodded to himself, as if satisfied at what he saw, and then with the same jerky motion he crawled forward until he was facing a section of the motionless circle of blacks. Then, suddenly, he leaped into life. With the whisk of feathers in his hand he sprang at first one and then another of the crowd, flicking each of them in turn with the plumed tuft, at the same time yelling out something in a peculiarly shrill scream, and so continued all round the circle. Soon, in response to the wild goading of the Medicine Man, all the blacks were in the throes of a frenzied excitement even wilder and less restrained than it had been before. They yelled and pranced in complete abandonment, while in the background the drum took up once more its insistent refrain. It was obvious that the Witch Doctor had his followers absolutely in his power, and had so stirred them up that they would obey his every command.

The whole village seemed to echo with the maniacal screams of its inhabitants. The ground trembled beneath their prancing feet. Then all at once,

there was silence again. The Witch Doctor had finished his provocation and was once more approaching the bound figure of my comrade. But this time, instead of the feathered flail, a short dagger gleamed in his hand.

Now at last I saw red. I was fascinated no more, only completely horrified to think that ' Jim,' with whom I had travelled so many miles up the Congo, ' Jim ' with his white hair and startling blue eyes, with his fund of humour and endless optimism, was in mortal danger. Struggling to my feet, I managed by some almost superhuman effort to shuffle through the circle of gaping natives, who were too intent on the actions of the Witch Doctor to notice my presence ; and then, shouting wildly, I hopped out towards the centre of the ring.

What was in my mind as I did this, I do not know. Obviously, any action would have been equally useless, fettered as I was. But if I intended to reach ' Jim ' my intention was baulked almost before it was formed. Almost casually, the Witch Doctor grunted out an order, and I found two black warriors at my side, holding me upright between them. In this way, pinned helplessly between the two negroes, I was forced to witness the vilest sight it has ever been my ill-fortune to see—the hideous murder of my friend and companion, ' Jim.'

Now, thirty years later, time has given that dreadful event the quality of a dream. I wonder sometimes, living peacefully in the heart of London, surrounded by all my animal companions, if it ever really happened. But then I lift my eyes to the wall opposite, and see hanging on the wall the sun-helmet which ' Jim ' once wore, the only relic of

him that I have ; and I know that it is no dream but a horrible reality.

The Witch Doctor by now had worked himself into a frenzy. With the dagger clutched between his fingers, he was leaping backwards and forwards in front of his victim, making feinting passes with the weapon, as though he would strike off his head, hopping round like some raving madman, feathers whirling, the tufted ears on his mask nodding malevolently. At last the crucial moment came. Slowly, crouched more than usual, in a series of kangaroo-like jumps, he approached ' Jim's ' unconscious form. He raised the hand which held the dagger. And then, before my horrified gaze, the weapon swooped down in a flashing arc and with a single blow severed ' Jim's ' head from his body.

I tried to scream out, to tear myself from the blacks who held me, but it was useless. I could do nothing. Sickened, yet still forced by a will stronger than mine to look at the scene before me, I saw the released sapling spring back into position, bearing with it the torn and bleeding head that had been Jim's.' Immediately the watching crowd of warriors leapt into life. With shouts and yells they broke from their ranks and hurtled after the prized trophy —the severed head. Dimly, as though through a thick mist, I saw them scrambling and fighting for its possession. Then merciful unconsciousness took hold of me and I remembered no more.

When I recovered consciousness it was to find myself in the middle of the clearing, lashed to the same tree-stump that had borne ' Jim's ' body. The body itself had disappeared and the clearing was deserted: nothing remained to show the

murder that had been committed there. Then, as my mind began to slowly grasp the probable meaning of my presence there, I was conscious of the sound of singing away in the distance, a not unmusical chant that came slowly nearer and nearer, until all at once there appeared out of the forest in closely-packed ranks, the army of warriors, bearing aloft in the air between them something on a rough stretcher of leaves and branches. When they came nearer I was able to see what it was they carried so carefully. It was the headless body of ' Jim.'

When the whole band had assembled in the clearing, the body was lowered to the ground and three warriors stepped forward and began to make a rough hearth of stone not four yards from where I was pinioned. When it was shaped, three others emerged from the ranks, and with twirling sticks made fires which were soon burning brightly between the stones. Then, and not till then, did the full implication of their actions burst upon my brain. I was going to see ' Jim ' cooked and eaten before my eyes !

With the spread of European civilization in Central Africa, cannibalism is fast being stamped out of the country. Government officers pursue the native who still dares to carry on the ancient practice, and the punishment is inevitably death. Travellers occasionally bring back rumours of rites, unmentionably vile, of which they have heard—for the Dark Continent will never be without its secrets ; but on the whole the native is being slowly but firmly subdued to a less primitive way of living. Thirty years ago, however, at the time of which I am writing, much of the interior had never been explored,

and the negro still lived as he pleased in his forest fastness. Only the gentle, and often ineffectual, words of the missionaries, or a few stray bullets from a trader's rifle, showed them that the practice of eating their fellow men was frowned upon by the Whites.

When I understood the full purport of the preparations before me, a feeling of nausea swept over me so strongly that I thought I should faint again. Murder, even the murder of my friend, was one thing—in my boyhood I had seen many knifings in the harbour taverns at Valetta, and during my first visit to Africa I had witnessed deaths as horrible as the tortures of the Spanish Inquisition—but cannibalism, the eating of human flesh, the flesh of a white man, was something immeasurably more horrible. Wave upon wave of physical sickness came over me. In vain I argued to myself that ' Jim ' was beyond all pain and misery, that he would never feel anything again : I could not convince myself. I shut my eyes and tried to concentrate on something else ; I willed myself to think of others things : it was useless. Again and again the nightmare reality before me forced itself into my consciousness. At length, when through my half-closed lids I saw the blacks crouching expectantly round the fire, when the pungent smell of roasted flesh was wafted to my nostrils, something seemed suddenly to snap in my brain. For over a day I had been without food or drink, for over a day I had been bound in a cramped, uncomfortable position, with thongs biting into my wrists and ankles. Now the horror before me was the final straw, and I could stand no more. Involuntarily, as though the sound came from another

person, I began to shout and scream. I could not stop myself. I laughed hysterically, and cursed, and wondered dimly in the back of my mind what I was laughing at. Then the blackness came again and I relapsed into unconsciousness.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE CURSE OF THE CANNIBALS

CANNIBALISM used to be practised for a variety of reasons by the natives of Central Africa.

In some tribes it had a religious motive: young children and virgin maidens were sacrificed to the tribal deity—usually an inanimate object such as a tree or a totem-pole, or a wooden carved image—and the priests of the cult, or the Medicine Men, would partake of the flesh. Thus the god, through the action of his priestly servant, received the sacrifice offered to him, and was appeased. In some particularly ferocious and warlike tribes, steps were taken to propitiate the god before almost any undertaking—going into battle, planting crops, beginning a ceremonial dance—and the Witch Doctor scarcely ate any food but human flesh.

There was also magical cannibalism. Followers of this cult believed that it was their duty to eat the flesh, especially the brains, of a man famed for his strength, his cunning, or his courage, in the hope that by so doing these qualities would pass into the eater and make him a greater warrior. The flesh of a white man—whites being considered, chiefly because of their fire-arms and their clothes, as the epitome of all virtues—was therefore the most

eagerly sought after, and was eaten with great rejoicings by all the members of the tribe.

The third type of cannibals were those who looked upon human flesh in the same way as any other flesh—merely as good meat. The majority of African negroes are great meat-eaters, and will gorge themselves almost to bursting-point whenever they have the chance—which is not often, for the wild creatures of the continent are shy and difficult to trap in their forest lairs—so it is not surprising to learn that instead of animal flesh, some of them would turn to their fellow-humans as a means of getting meat.

I never managed to discover which type of cannibalism the Lualaba natives practised—luckily for me, my stay with them was brief in the extreme—but from the lack of ceremony and ritual which accompanied the actual feasting, I decided that they probably followed the last cult, and considered human flesh merely as a welcome addition to their scanty *menu*.

I was brought back to consciousness by the sound of shouting and singing, which slowly penetrated my senses and awoke me to life. I opened my eyes. I was still lashed to the stake, and in a wild circle round me, dancing with an abandonment as frenzied as it had been before, spears gleaming, anklets jangling, were the band of warriors. But this time it was I, instead of poor ' Jim,' who was the object of their excitement, it was my death they were celebrating, and presumably it was a banquet from my dead body that they were anticipating with such gusto.

From my uncomfortable position I looked round

as best I could, to see if the Witch Doctor were anywhere near. It was he, I knew, who held my fate in his hands, and I wanted to be prepared. Strangely enough, I felt no fear at the thought of my imminent death. I had undergone so many privations, mental and physical, that my brain refused to take in any more horrors. Starved, parched with thirst, my wrists and ankles swollen from the bonds that bit into them, my mind numbed by the nightmare scenes I had witnessed and the cruel death of ' Jim,' I longed for anything, even death itself, that would take me for ever out of my misery.

Sunk into apathy once more, I was roused by a long black shadow which fell across the ground in front of me, and, looking up, I saw it belonged to the Witch Doctor who, wolf's mask in place over his head, feather skirt standing our stiffly, like a ballet dancer's, round his waist, was crouched before me. Through the holes in the mask I could see his eyes glittering blackly. A dagger hung in a belt at his side.

He grunted some words to me, seemingly in the nature of a ritual, because he must have known that I could not understand them, and then stepped forward to the circle of dancing warriors, his feather whip in his hand, obviously bent on stirring them up to a pitch of overmastering excitement so that they could be subdued to his will. He darted back and forth in front of them, as I had seen him do before, working himself into a slavering frenzy, and then he crept with his long, crouching stride towards me again, his hand fumbling with the short sword at his belt. The moment had arrived.

For what followed—the amazing occurrence which

seemed to me afterwards like a miracle from Heaven —I can only thank Providence, so long hostile to me, for thus at last taking my part. It was, purely and simply, one of the most amazing strokes of good fortune which has ever happened to me, and added the finishing, incredible touch to a series of events which to-day I am tempted to look upon as a gigantic, night-long dream, instead of as the reality which in fact it was.

As the Witch Doctor slouched towards me, preparing no doubt to fasten my head to the slender sapling which had, ages ago it seemed, borne the head of my friend, there came the sound of shouts and guttural laughter from behind the row of huts that fringed the clearing, and about a dozen of the warriors emerged, bearing on their ebony shoulders the canoe in which 'Jim' and I had sailed up the Lualaba River. For some unaccountable reason the trophy seemed to have been overlooked during the excitement of the past few hours, and the warriors had only just recalled it to mind. Their curiosity about its contents was evident.

African negroes are the most fickle people I have ever known. It is the easiest thing in the world to distract their attention from the matter in hand, for their curiosity is so great that they will give up their whole interest to anything new. In spite of the power the Witch Doctor wielded over them, in spite of the mad frenzy which gripped them, they were still sane enough to wonder about the contents of the canoe, and a large section of the circle of dancers left their places and clustered round the newly-found prize.

Chuckles of delight heralded the discovery of the

cheap trinkets we had brought with us as gifts for any blacks we might meet on our journey. A long roll of bright cotton cloth was taken out and handed round, for all the world as though it were being shown to a group of customers in a draper's shop. A packet of pins caused a similar diversion. And in spite of my horrible predicament, and the realization that my death was being but deferred, I could not help smiling as the warriors squatted there, child-like wonderment on their faces, looking like a family of chimpanzees round a new, and possibly dangerous, toy.

The Witch Doctor's face was hidden in his mask, so I could not see his expression ; but I guessed that he was angry at the interruption to his chosen purpose. Even so, his curiosity could not be withstood for long, and he, too, moved over to the canoe, watching the unloading of its contents. He realized, presumably, that I was safe enough, bound hand and foot to the stake, and that my death could easily be postponed for a minute or two.

More and more treasures were lifted from the boat and passed admiringly from hand to hand : lengths of material, coils of bright copper wire, cheap rings and brooches. In turn the negroes tried them on, draping the pieces of stuff around their naked bodies and strutting about proudly, slipping the rings and bracelets over wrists and fingers and watching them glint in the sun. At length one of the younger warriors, who up till now had been unable to acquire anything, foraged into the very bottom of the canoe and brought out something wrapped round with a cloth. Carefully he uncovered it, thinking no doubt that he had discovered a great prize, and there was

revealed to the astonished gaze of the assembled black men something which in the terrible events of the past day I had completely forgotten—the Dried Head!

From where I stood I could see the negro standing stock-still, the head suspended by its hair from his hand, an expression of the utmost stupefaction on his face. The rest of the warriors seemed similarly tranced into stone, as though the Dried Head—like the head of Medusa—had cast a spell upon them. Then all at once, like an avenging fury, the Witch Doctor leapt into life.

Springing forward, he confronted the terrified warrior, and I could see his eyes glittering malevolently through the slits in the mask. He gabbled out some order, his voice rising to a high-pitched shriek as he did so, and immediately the warrior opened his fingers so that the Dried Head fell to the ground. The Witch Doctor looked at it for a moment, at its gaping mouth and sunken eyes, and then looked away at the circle of tribesmen shrinking and cowering from the new-found relic. All at once he seemed to make up his mind. Carefully, so that only two fingers touched it, he picked up the Head and held it aloft before the tribe.

The result of his gesture surprised me. The warriors immediately began to stamp and shuffle, with bent knees, circling round in a dance that was not wild and frenzied as the cannibalistic orgy had been, but quieter and somehow more fearful and awe-stricken. From time to time, too, they stooped and touched their foreheads to the ground in a gesture vaguely reminiscent of Muslim worship, so that I decided the tribe must on some occasion in

its career have come in contact with Mohammedanism and copied its manner of prayer.

No drum throbbed. Only the slow, steady shuffle continued, like the monotonous, ceaseless pacing of an imprisoned tiger up and down its cage, round and round, up and down, backwards and forwards, in utter silence, an expression of absorbed concentration on each black face, as though the worshippers—if worshippers they were—were trying to recall a long-forgotten ritual, or the steps of an ancient dance.

They seemed to have forgotten all about me. I was no longer the centre of attraction. With the discovery of the Dried Head I had become a mere nonentity. So I waited—there was, indeed, nothing else I could do—to see what the next move of the Witch Doctor would be.

I was not left long in doubt. Suddenly, as though recalling me to mind, he rushed up to me, still clutching the gruesome relic, and began to address me, pointing first to the Head and then to me, as though asking me peremptorily where I had found it.

I shrugged my shoulders : it was too long a story to explain in sign-language.

He gabbled on and on, gesticulating wildly with his arms, pushing the Head up against my face and repeating the same guttural words over and over again ; and then all at once he came towering over me, wolf's jowl snarling evilly, and raised his arm. The dagger gleamed between his fingers. For a second I thought that the end had indeed come at last, but—luckily for me—it was not to be. With a flash the weapon descended, and I found myself, not dead—as I had imagined for a moment—but

free, the thongs falling to the ground at my feet like a pair of writhing serpents as the Witch Doctor severed them with one blow of his knife.

In spite of this act of kindness, my liberator did not seem to be regarding me with any marked degree of friendliness. He continued to address me, and the tone of his voice, low and muffled as it came through the wolfish mask, told me that he still regarded me as an enemy, yet an enemy to whom he was forced to accord a grudging respect. Something—what, I did not know, but it appeared to be connected with the Dried Head found in my canoe—seemed to have caused the Medicine Man to change his attitude towards me. He hated me still, but, strangely, he also behaved as though he feared me.

I staggered about for a time, all feeling having gone from my limbs because of my long bondage, and then leaned against the stake for support. I could not understand the strange awe with which the tribe now regarded me. They had killed my comrade, 'Jim,' and I could have sworn that they were also preparing to kill me. Yet now I was free. Presumably I could leave the village, if I wished to do so.

This, I was soon to discover, was precisely what the Witch Doctor and his followers desired. They no longer wanted to murder me and eat my flesh: they wanted to be rid of me as soon as possible. At a command from the huge masked figure at my side, two of the warriors stepped forward from the silent circle and placed their hands lightly on my shoulders. Then, headed by the Witch Doctor, we began to march, a backward glance showing me that the whole of the tribe was following in a long, winding procession.

My legs were still cramped, and at every step a sensation of pin-pricking shot through them, so that the march was a long agony. But the warriors at my side dragged me on when I stumbled, as though anxious to see the last of me as soon as possible, and soon we had reached the brushwood gate which was the only entrance to the palisade. Then at last the Witch Doctor, who all this time had been marching in front, without once looking round, turned and faced me. He lifted his hands above his head, one of them still clutching the Dried Head, and began to speak.

Many times in my life I have bewailed my inability to speak all the different African languages, but never so strongly as I did at that particular moment. During my previous visit to the Dark Continent I had learned to speak the dialect of the Gaboon natives—which I have since discovered to be a very corrupt and hardly recognizable form of Bantu—but as far as I could hear, that tongue had scarcely any connection with this spoken by my present captors, and only occasionally did my ears catch a familiar sound.

It seemed that the Witch Doctor was making a pronouncement of more than ordinary importance. His voice did not vary in pitch, but went droning on in the same monotonous, sing-song tone, as though he were chanting an incantation. Away in the distance the drum began to throb, the sound mingling with the low mumble of the speaker until the air around seemed to be vibrating dully. Then suddenly, having sung his monotonous chant for about five minutes, he woke to life, and began leaping around, shrieking at the top of his voice, working himself

into a frenzy of fury. He flung up his arms, as if to call down the curses of Heaven upon my head, and when his voice rang out loudly, the warriors on either side of me cowered back, as though to ward off some evil influence.

Later, I found out exactly what the strange ritual meant. The Witch Doctor was cursing me; with all the superstition of the average African negro, he was invoking the aid of his evil spirits to wreak vengeance on the head of the man who had returned to the tribe the evil *ju-ju* which it had hoped never to see again. For the Head, I was to discover, also bore a curse, so that whosoever found it was doomed to destruction.

Because I had been in contact with it, I was under the influence of its curse, and therefore no one was allowed to kill me. I was *taboo*, untouchable. But I could be cursed. And so the Witch Doctor was calling down the most terrible punishments he could imagine on my head, sure in his own mind that the evil spirits that dwell, according to believers in Voodism, in the thunder and the cataract and the darkness—all friendless things to the negro—would see that I was given a just reward for my wickedness.

The Medicine Man droned on and on, his voice booming loudly as he reached the climax of the curse. Then all at once, after a series of high-pitched, blood-curdling shrieks that echoed among the tree-tops and set the monkeys chattering, he ceased. There was dead silence. The warriors grouped behind me waited, tense, expectant. The Witch Doctor took three paces forward and stood looking down at me.

For a moment he remained there motionless, and I gazed back at him, taking in all the weird details of

his monstrous attire: the wolfish mask, with its grinning jaws and tufted, hairy ears; the brilliant plumes that still fluttered from the wild movements of their wearer; the mutilated black body. There was an arrogance about him, a sort of regal confidence which I could not help but acknowledge. I looked, too, at the Dried Head hanging by a strand of thin black hair from his fingers, at the stretched brown skin of it, and the yellow teeth. He must have caught the direction in which my eyes strayed, for all at once he took a step forward, uttered a low grunt as he did so, and thrust the gruesome relic into my hand.

This action puzzled me greatly at the time, although later I discovered exactly why the Witch Doctor was so anxious to get rid of the Head. It had been cursed, and all who touched it were liable to fall beneath the curse. But at the time I could not understand why the tribe, who obviously looked upon the relic with awe not unmixed with terror, should be content to give it back to me when they had only just recovered it. But contented they evidently were with the action, for in their relief they shuffled their feet, and let their held breath slip through their teeth in little hisses. For my part, in some strange way I was glad to have the weird trophy back in my possession. By some unaccountable means it had saved me from the death which 'Jim' had died, and I felt that I must have it. It seemed to have a queer, inexplicable power which one day might be useful to me. It had, too, been entrusted to me by Sebah, as he lay dying by the cage of the lion that had killed him.

There was silence again, and suddenly I made up

my mind that I had endured this play-acting long enough. I would try my luck at leaving the village. If I were hauled back into captivity, I would be no worse off than I was now. No sooner was this decision reached, than I acted. Without a backward glance I pushed my way out of the brushwood entrance to the palisade and began walking along the trail.

Behind me there was complete stillness. Not a warrior moved. Even the drum had shuddered into silence. As I pressed further and further into the gloomy depths, the branches closed over me. The undergrowth, thick and tangled, blotted out the clearing and the group of silent warriors. I was alone.

CHAPTER NINE

JUNGLE WANDERERS

THE forest path, as I stumbled along it, grew less and less well marked, until it was scarcely distinguishable from the surrounding undergrowth. As I penetrated further into the gloomy depths, the darkness grew more profound. But I did not care. I was not afraid of the forest, as friendly to me as the village had been inhospitable. All I wanted was to get as far away as possible from the natives, from the place where 'Jim' had lost his life, from the scene of so many nightmare horrors; and without caring in what direction I was travelling, I journeyed on.

When I had pushed my way past the Witch Doctor and out into the forest, I had expected him to make some sort of remonstrance, to order his warriors to pursue me and bring me back to the village; but no one had stirred. The forest, too, was silent. No sound of bodies crashing through the undergrowth betokened the approach of a band of men. I seemed to have got clean away, and in a little while I gave up all thought of pursuit and made my way slowly through the jungle.

By now I was almost faint from lack of food. Ever since I had been captured by the blacks on the banks of the Lualaba River, I had eaten nothing.

At first, so intent was I on putting as great a distance as possible between myself and my enemies, I gave no thought to my hunger ; but soon I found that I could go no further unless I gained some strength. Accordingly, I began to look about me for some edible herb or fruit with which to combat the weakness that was gripping me and forcing me to my knees.

My search, growing more and more frenzied, yielded nothing. Scrambling lianas, whose leaves, I knew, were sour and bitter to the taste, were everywhere, entwined with tall canes which towered out of reach above my head. Briars with bright red prickles tore at my clothes as if to stay my progress. But food there was not. In all the vastness of the forest, in all its luxuriant vegetation, stretching in places nearly twenty feet over me, there did not seem to be one banana tree, one plantain, to offer me the means of life.

Drearily I staggered on, mile after mile, feeling such an utter weariness of mind and body that even to continue the search for food began to become unbearably strenuous. Nothing seemed to matter any more. A mossy tree-stump, set in the midst of a clump of creepers with orchid-like flowers—purple, spotted with brown—offered me a sanctuary. Although all my past experience in the forest told me that such a resting-place was open to all the dangers of the jungle—snakes and stinging insects and prowling, hungry beasts—I did not care. Crawling in among the tangled undergrowth, I lay down, my head pillowed on the soft green moss, and drifted off into a state of semi-consciousness, half asleep and half waking.

Instinct, however, cannot help but remain, even when the mind is numb from exhaustion, and works almost involuntarily, so that when a rustling noise sounded in the bushes some yards away, I sat up, my senses alert in spite of my feeling of weakness, and strained my ears for the next indication of a hostile presence, whether human or animal. Ordinarily, although unarmed, I would have considered myself a match for any creature—there was a time when I could climb a tree with the speed and agility of a chimpanzee—but now I was starved and exhausted. So I waited, crouching silently, to see what would appear out of the gloom.

The apparition, when it did come into view, moved me more to laughter than to fear. It was comical indeed. The undergrowth was parted silently, and there emerged a black man, dressed most remarkably in a length of gaudy cloth wound skirt-wise about his middle, with a sun-helmet perched precariously upon his head!

He looked cautiously around him, and in a second had caught sight of me, whereupon he cowered back among the foliage, obviously wondering what sort of reception I would give him. I made no movement—indeed, I felt almost too weak to stand—but sat back in the bower of creeper, waiting for him to advance, and eventually he plucked up enough courage to come forward.

Soon I was able to recognize him: he was the very warrior, dressed now in a length of our material and in 'Jim's' sun-hat, who had first come upon the Dried Head in our canoe.

Running up to me, he knelt on both knees, laying his head on the ground at my feet, so that 'Jim's'

topi scraped the earth. Palms downward, his hands clutching convulsively at the moss which lined my resting-place, he remained there with bowed head. He seemed to be paying homage to me, acknowledging my superiority, but at the same time, as he crouched before me, I saw his eyes peering fearfully beneath the brim of the helmet at the Dried Head which lay at my side. To him, obviously, it was still an object of awe and veneration, a powerful *ju-ju*, and he was quite unable to account for my continued existence, with the evil relic lying at my side. In his mind a problem seemed to be raging back and forth: which was the more powerful—the Dried Head, or me.

He rose at length and stood in front of me, his head slightly bowed and his arms hanging slackly to his sides in an attitude of submission. Softly he spoke some words to me—I could not understand them, but guessed at their meaning—he seemed to be asking what he could do for me. I shook my head impatiently. What use was a black servant to me? But even as I did so I recalled the plight in which I was placed—weakness and starvation making me an easy prey for any creature that dared to attack me—and suddenly realized that his presence might be useful to me, even providential. With a new hope, I made signs to him that I was hungry and required food.

He understood me at once, and disappeared into the undergrowth, where I heard him foraging among the bushes, crashing into the canes and young saplings and sending the startled birds squawking into the tree-tops affrighted. In a little while he returned, to my vast delight bearing in his hand a cluster of greenish plantains.

Plantains, unlike their sister fruit, the banana, require to be cooked before they are eaten, but this once I decided that they were infinitely preferable raw. My mouth watered at the sight of them and, snatching them greedily from the hands of the warrior, I began stuffing them into my mouth. I did not notice their somewhat unpleasant flavour—uncooked plantain has a floury, acrid taste something like that of a very green banana—but thought instead that I had never tasted anything so delicious. With each mouthful I felt new strength coursing through my veins, and when I had finished the whole of the black man's offering—quite forgetting in my ravenous hunger that he, too, might be famished—I began to feel that life was worth living after all.

When I had finished eating, the warrior, still looking after my needs like a servant, brought me a hollowed-out calabash containing some sort of liquid. I drank. It was flat and tasteless, like pond water, and I concluded that he must have gone painstakingly about, collecting the moisture that dripped off the leaves and grass-blades, to quench my thirst. I smiled at him gratefully when I had emptied the gourd, and began to look about me.

Hours ago I had searched vainly for a handful of these very plantains to stave off the pangs of hunger that gripped me. Now, as soon as I expressed a desire for food, the warrior had brought me some. Either he had been extremely fortunate in his discovery, or else he was an expert woodsman. I wondered precisely what chance had brought him here to me in the forest. Had he been banished from the tribe by the Witch Doctor for the part he had

THROUGH THE GRASSLAND

NATIVES CARRYING AN IVORY TUSK

Sudan Railways

'SOMETIMES , WE SAW HERDS OF ELEPHANTS MIGRATING'

played in the finding of the sacred relic, or had he followed me voluntarily, believing that my magic was stronger than the magic of the Dried Head? There seemed to be no way in which I could find out, but at least now he was here and obviously disposed to stay with me, it seemed best to let him remain. He might prove useful to me in many ways. So when, strengthened and refreshed, I set off through the forest, the black man followed patiently at my heels.

There is no place on earth, I think—and I have travelled into many corners of the world—as awe-inspiring as a primeval African forest. Over a hundred feet high, the tall trees push upwards towards the sun, their trunks scabbed with grey lichen and encircled with vines as thick as a man's wrist. The foliage of the parasitic lianas that batten on the lordly giants of the jungle tumbles everywhere in sickening luxuriance: great, leathery leaves and fleshy tendrils grope blindly towards the light; ferns, their feathery fronds often nearly six yards in length, cascade groundwards; tangled clusters of purple-flowered creepers twist and twine overhead. And beneath all this prodigality, this lavish profusion of Nature, the traveller walks always in a green twilight, in a tunnel of green gloom, flanked by the tall columns of the trees whose closely-arched summits are never penetrated by the rays of the fierce, tropic sun.

On the ground, a thick carpet of leaves and rotting vegetation, intermingled with beds of succulent green grass, hides the black soil from view. This carpet is always wet, for in Equatorial Africa a storm of heavy rain usually falls for about two

hours every afternoon, and the damp earth, never visited by the sun, seldom dries. The steamy atmosphere, too, sends up clouds of vapour which condense and fall in drops to the ground. So in the forest there is a continual sound of dripping water, monotonous, never-ending, as moisture falls from leaf to leaf and seeps slowly through the mossy soil.

From time to time, following a little track barely two yards wide, made either by native carriers or by animals—I could not tell which, but by my companion's assurance I felt he had taken the same path before—we came upon a clearing, where a circle of rotting tree-stumps told us that it had once been the site of a village. Congo natives, when they wish to build a new encampment, cut down a few of the forest giants, choosing a spot about six feet up the trunk—where it is slenderer than at the base—to begin their operations. These huge trees in their fall bring a certain amount of vegetation crashing down with them, and in this way a rough clearing is made. The stumps are never quite sawn away, but are left to rot, and, incidentally, to mark the position of many an old, deserted village.

Piercing rays of sunlight shone down into these clearings through the little gap thus made in the tangled green canopy overhead, and where the rays warmed the steamy earth clusters of brilliant butterflies clung, spreading their wings gratefully to the heat. Humming birds, too, darted here and there among the orchids in exquisite splashes of colour, and dipped their long tongues into the hibiscus blossoms to sip the honey. As we approached they all, butterflies and birds alike, rose and hovered for a moment in the air, their jewelled wings fluttering,

to sink down again as if exhausted as soon as we had passed on.

It was wonderful for me to be back in the forest again, unhampered by civilization, with no real aim or purpose to direct my steps, free to roam as I pleased ; and I determined, provided that food and water were plentiful enough, to remain for a time in the twilight depths, living the life of the forest animals, as I had done in the Gaboon country before. Perhaps—who knew ?—I might once more meet my friends, the great gorilla kings of the jungle, might once again join in their games and share their fortunes. Perhaps I might encounter other and stranger beasts : elephants, giraffes, the almost legendary okapi. At any rate, whatever lay ahead, I made up my mind to stay for a while in the heart of the African forest.

My black companion did not seem disposed to leave my side. He constituted himself my servant, fetched me roots and sweet fruits, and shook the branches to collect dew in the calabash which he wore slung at his waist, to quench my thirst. Always he treated me with the greatest deference, debasing himself humbly before me whenever he approached ; but still he gazed fearfully at the Dried Head which I continued to carry, and would not touch it.

So for days we travelled through the primeval forest that stretched for hundreds of miles on all sides around us. I had no possible means of telling where we were—nor did I much care—only the position of the sun, when it was visible in some clearing, telling me that our direction was roughly a northerly one. Big game seemed particularly scarce in this part of the land, although sometimes,

as we passed beside a stagnant pool, red-tinted, and fringed with tall rushes and orange fungi, we discovered spoor and could see how some large creature had trampled the reeds as it leaned forward to drink. But otherwise the presence of big creatures might have been non-existent, and the forest was silent, save for the twitter of birds so high up as to be almost invisible, and the chatter of monkeys who did not fear us, but swung along merrily in our wake.

Even at night-time, when the jungle usually wakes up and prepares to live, there was deep silence. Sometimes, perched in the low fork of a tree, with my black companion beside me, I would hear the cough of a leopard or the shriek of a captured bird. Noises, mysterious and uncanny, rustlings and faint shufflings, would occasionally make me prick up my ears and look down into the gloom beneath. But I saw nothing, and soon the sounds would cease and there would be silence again.

Equally apparent, too, was the absence of any human kind. Although we kept all the time to the little track that wound among the undergrowth, bordered on each side by natural hedges of clambering lianas and roofed over by leaves that met in a thick arch overhead, we encountered no sign of natives. No man-made huts met our eyes as we emerged into a clearing, and no painted warrior, or hunter armed with spear or arrow, crossed our path.

After living for some weeks in this way, without a glimpse of any other creatures, human or animal, save the inevitable monkeys, the snakes and insects and small, lizardy things that crept from under the stones and damp leaves, my black companion began

to get a little restless. Some natives, notably the pygmies, are nomads, roaming from place to place and never staying for more than a month in the same place. They are hunters and have to go where their prey leads them. But the majority of negroes have homes to which they always return, permanent houses in which they keep their weapons, their utensils, and their treasured talismans. So one day, when we came across a particularly pleasant clearing, fringed with groves of bananas and manioc that would provide us with food for many months to come, I decided that we, too, would build a hut and set up house in the middle of the forest.

By now, having spent several weeks in the black warrior's company, I had managed to pick up a certain amount of his language. Basically, it was not, after all, so very different from that spoken by the Gaboon natives, and although by no means able to express myself fluently, I could at least make myself understood. When, therefore, I stood still in the clearing and said 'house,' his reaction was immediate. Without a second's hesitation he nodded his head excitedly and began looking round for a suitable site.

The hut, built beneath the shadow of a huge mahogany tree to protect it from the daily deluges, was the simplest affair imaginable. Its foundations were composed of young saplings, cut off at the root and stuck in a circle in the ground. Its walls were made of thick but pliable lianas, twisted in and out of the saplings in the manner of weaving, and pulled so close together that scarcely a chink of light pierced them, the whole thing plastered with the mud that formed in the clearing after every after-

noon torrent. The roof was, I thought, a more difficult problem, but M'bopa—for such, he told me, was his name—did not seem to be at any loss. He took branches and laid them thickly across the top of the hut, binding them securely into place with the rope-like lianas, and soon the building was complete.

When it was done he immediately began making another, and before the sun had dropped behind the trees and left us in darkness, two huts stood in the clearing. I went into one of them and took possession. Though dark and with a damp floor, it was not without its comfort, especially after a succession of nights spent in the forks of trees, exposed to all the dews and rainstorms of Equatorial Africa, and when I had torn up some long grass for a couch, and filled up with mud and leaves any chinks in the wall that let in the damp, I decided that the forest could offer me no greater luxury in the way of a shelter.

Emerging from the hut, I found the black making fire with two pieces of stick. One piece, with a hole hollowed in it, was laid on the ground ; the other he stuck in the hole and twirled round and round between his fingers. Soon smoke arose from the friction of the wood, bits of dried grass which he had placed round the sticks began to smoulder, and then the whole kindling burst into flame. M'bopa fed the fire until it was burning well, and then he took a few steps forward and proceeded to light another, until all round our huts was a circle of blazing twigs and grass.

In view of the apparent absence of any of the larger carnivora from this part of the forest, it seemed an unnecessary precaution to light fires to

keep them away, but the black had already shown himself to be an expert woodsman in tracking me from the native village, and I did not question the wisdom of his action.

Having finished his fire-making operations, M'bopa disappeared into the forest for a minute, and came out with a huge handful of plantains which he proceeded to cook at one of the fires. When the rawness of them had been singed off, he picked them up, placed them—with unusual delicacy for a savage—on a large leaf, and handed the whole thing to me. I took as much as I wanted and gave the remainder back to him, and then, both of us chewing hungrily, we returned to our respective huts. I sidled through the space which had been left between two of the saplings to form a door, and lay down on the grass mattress. Overhead, an insect hummed in the roof, hitting itself against the branches in its blind flight. On and on it droned, the steady buzz drugging my senses, and in a little while I was fast asleep.

So began a period of delightful, carefree life in the depths of the African forest. There were no adventures, amusing or exciting, to break the pleasant monotony : no natives broke through the trees with wild shouts to make us prisoners ; no animals, even, disturbed our solitude. Sometimes, to M'bopa's fearful astonishment, I walked out into the middle of the glade and gave the gorilla call, the familiar, long-drawn-out roar which in the old days would have summoned every gorilla within hearing distance to my side. But it evoked no response. Any apes that might once have been in the vicinity seemed to have shambled off into other parts of the jungle and could not hear my cry.

Life in the jungle is apt to be monotonous at times, especially in a part of the forest which seems to have been deserted by the larger animals. Nothing much happens, and one day proves to be very like another. The sun rises over the tree-tops in the early morning, piercing the branches with its relentless rays and tipping every dewdrop with gold. The birds and monkeys wake with it and begin their day-long search for food. Nature embarks upon her never-ending circle of cruelty: the humming bird pursues the ant, the hawk chases the humming bird, the snake lies in wait for the hawk. 'Kill or be killed,' is the law of the jungle, and who does not abide by it must perish.

Yet, in spite of the monotony, I always found something among the chattering monkeys and thousands of twittering birds to engage my attention and keep me amused. Perhaps it would be a parasitic plant, so beautiful that an orchid-hunter would have given a year of his life just to set his eyes upon it, yet so cruel that it set a fair trap to provide itself with food. With lips parted invitingly, in promise of the honey lying within, it would sway gently on its stalk, until an insect had the temerity to wander near the death-trap. Once inside the gaping, fragile lips, the insect was caught. The mouth shut automatically; the live victim was imprisoned; and in two or three days' time the carcase, sucked dry of blood, would be ejected and cast on to the ground.

Gradually, as I spent more and more time in his company, I got to know M'bopa better. As is the way of all natives, he paid no attention to the beauties around him, taking all the wild life of the forest, its exquisite flowers and gorgeous insects,

completely for granted. But anything new in the way of tricks or inventions which I could show him delighted him immeasurably, and when I could speak his language sufficiently well to make him understand me my tales of civilization kept him entranced for hours.

He laughed loudly and sceptically when I told him that in the land where I came from men could speak to each other even though they were many miles apart, and seemed to suggest in his own fashion that I was pulling his leg. Although I protested loudly that I was speaking the truth, he would not believe me until I made him a model—primitive in the extreme, but good enough to serve my purpose—of the telephone. I took a bamboo cane and cut two sections out of it, so that I had two cylindrical hollow tubes. Then I plaited hundreds of grasses together into a thin rope many yards in length, and fastened the tubes one to each end of it. I gave him one of the tubes and told him to put his ear to it, walking away from him with the other tube until I was out of sight and beyond speaking distance. Then I spoke into my piece of cane.

The effect was magical. I heard footsteps pounding through the undergrowth, and in a few seconds M'bopa burst upon me, clutching the cane in his hand, his face transfigured with amazement.

"I heard your voice, master!" he cried. "I heard it in the wonderful stick! It is magic; a magic *ju-ju!*"

When he learned that he, too, could speak in the tube and I should hear it, his delight knew no bounds. The 'telephone' I had made for him became the most wonderful toy he had ever seen. He climbed

trees and spoke through the branches to me by means of the 'magic stick.' He took it with him when he went out to gather fruits and berries, and—quite oblivious of the fact that I was not always holding my end of the instrument to my ear, but had laid it on the ground—reported the results of his search. When, to please him still further, I suggested we should take our pieces of cane into our huts at night-time, his cup of happiness was full, and he woke me early the next morning by chanting some native song into the instrument, which I had inadvertently left near my ear.

One day, as I was trying to explain the life of the White Man to him, I scratched my name upon a piece of bark and told him that now the piece of bark could speak. The marks I had made would take a message to another white man, even though he might be hundreds of miles away. When he heard this he took the rough tablet in his hands as though it were a talisman, and carried it to his hut where, as far as I know, he kept it for many days.

In return for my teaching, M'bopa showed me many things that were new to me, and I soon discovered that his knowledge of bush-lore was tremendous. Also he astonished me with the games of strength and skill which his tribe had apparently devised in order to indulge the negro spirit of competition. I did my best to copy him in these contests and, although he laughed uproariously at my efforts, he was very patient with me; but I never managed to acquire the knack or instinct necessary to accomplish native feats.

He would, for instance, take a small piece of wood, about a foot in length, and put it in his mouth so

that four inches were inside and eight out. Then, having found a rock or stone—often weighing sixty to seventy pounds—he would balance it on the wood so that his teeth bore the whole weight. Standing about twelve paces from a tree or boulder, he would suddenly flirt his head backwards, hurling the stone over his head with such force that it hit the target with a resounding thwack. This game, I gathered, was usually played by about ten men, who either aimed at a target or else saw which of them could fling the stone the greatest distance away, and, watching M'bopa perform, I never failed to marvel: first, at his ability to balance the heavy stone on the slender piece of wood; secondly, that he managed to hurl the stone over his head without breaking his neck.

His methods of killing birds and small monkeys in the tree-tops amazed me. Sometimes he would take a piece of flax, or a plaited length of grass or chewed fibre, and wind it tightly round the end of a small bamboo arrow, pointed sharply at the tip. With a flick of his wrist—rather in the manner of one throwing a cricket ball—he would hurl the arrow into the air, sending it with such force that it went clean out of sight and took some considerable time before it returned to the earth. His accuracy of aim, and his skill in gauging the distance and judging the target's rate of progress, were so great that he could bring to the ground a bird winging its way across the clearing, even though the bird was flying so high that I could scarcely see it. Monkeys chattering in the trees could also sometimes be brought down by this means, although the branches were apt to impede the flight of the arrow and entangle the piece of flax.

On other occasions he would collect a number of tiny round stones, each the size of an English three-penny-piece, and climb with them into a tall tree. From a vantage point along one of the branches he would watch out for birds and snakes and small mammals, and when he caught sight of one of them would put a pebble into his mouth and blow it—without a blowpipe—at the target. His accuracy was amazing, the quarry falling stunned to the ground on almost every occasion ; but when I tried the trick the result was woefully different. Although I practised very hard, I never became very accurate, and missed my aim nine times out of ten.

So, unhampered by time or place or object, we passed many happy months in the forest, attending to our simple needs, inventing our childish games, and taking occasional expeditions further into the interior, in the hope of seeing the animals which never appeared. M'bopa was my constant companion, and yet many long weeks passed before he began to treat me as an equal rather than as a master. Superstition still coloured many of his thoughts and actions, and he could not easily forget my power over the Witch Doctor, or the Dried Head which still lay in my hut, its mouth for ever parted in a wide, yellow-toothed leer. Beneath his confiding exterior —a veneer which nearly all natives possess—he was aloof and uncommunicative, and even when I could understand everything he said to me and could engage him in lengthy conversations he still remained something of an enigma, so that it took a lot of patience on my part before I was able to elicit some information about the question whose answer I burned to hear : the question of the Dried Head.

The majority of African negroes shut up like clams as soon as strangers make any mention of their tribal customs and rituals. Their sacred rites and secret societies are usually considered too holy to be displayed or described to the uninitiated, especially to the curious, sacrilegious white man. M'bopa was no exception, and it took a long time before I was enough in his confidence even to broach the subject. Gradually, however, the strange facts came out, and bit by bit I was able to piece them together, until the whole of the mysterious tale was laid before me.

CHAPTER TEN

THE STORY OF THE DRIED HEADS

LONG ago (said M'bopa), many years before my mother bore me, the tribe was very small, with only a few wives stolen from neighbouring villages and a tiny herd of cattle to make it wealthy. In order to increase their riches, the warriors used to venture far afield, where they were unknown, in search of women and animals, striking across unknown trails and through the dense virgin forests where no man had trod before.

One day a band of warriors in the course of their wanderings stumbled across a strange city. (I was not sure about the word 'city.' The term M'bopa used invariably denotes the fortifications of white men in the jungle, but the city he described had no connection with European traders or explorers.) It was built on the fringe of one of the mighty forests where it was thinning out into the grassland which stretches east of the Lualaba for miles across the African plains towards Lake Tanganyika; and the huts, instead of being made of branches or straw roughly cemented together with mud, were of white stone, squarely built, with little open windows and smooth clay roofs. Swept pathways, edged with beds of bright grass, ran along in front of the houses.

Such whiteness and regularity astounded the

hunters, accustomed always to dirty wattle huts erected higgledy-piggledy all over the village clearing, and they stole silently round the encampment, anxious for a glimpse of the inhabitants. No one came. No children ran chattering along the paths ; no women stood in front of their huts pounding maize and millet ; no warriors emerged from the forest with the spoils of the chase slung over their shoulders. There was not a sign of life in the whole place.

The Witch Doctor who was leading the expedition, however, was a brave man—according to M'bopa—and although he knew the mighty powers of the spirits, he was not afraid of the terrible *ju-ju* which seemed to have come to the deserted village and chased away its inhabitants. He collected his men together, and with spears lifted and shields held high the whole band broke through the covering undergrowth of head-high grass and burst into the clearing. Their battle yells resounded through the emptiness, as though a whole tribe were approaching instead of a body of twenty men ; but still not a soul appeared to confront them or bid them welcome. The village was deserted, dead, and not a living thing remained to tell where its inhabitants had gone.

The warriors stole among the little whitewashed brick houses, noticing with awe the hearths with embers grey upon them, the primitive chimneys, the shapely pots and earthenware jugs, the tools stacked against the walls. It was when they came to the last hut in the village that the surprise occurred. Two of them poked their heads round the little door to see what treasures they could find within, and to their astonishment found that they were not alone. Crouched up against the wall of the hut, forced into

a sitting posture by the ropes that bound their arms and bent knees, were two people, a man and a woman, white-haired, wrinkled, so old that they looked like two dried, long-dead mummies, each dressed in a long white robe of some fine cotton stuff. Strangest thing of all—their faces were not black, but a pale, coffee-coloured brown, a complexion which the natives had never seen before.

The men who had come upon this strange apparition rushed precipitately outside the hut, terrified out of their wits almost by the sight of the two pale strangers. Their frenzied yells brought the rest of the band rushing towards them, including the Witch Doctor. He listened gravely to their tale, and then, pushing the group of muttering, awe-stricken warriors aside, marched through the doorway of the hut. It was a long time before he came out again.

I do not know (continued M'bopa) what the Mighty One of the tribe said to the two old strangers, nor what they said to him, but people say that when he returned to the waiting hunters his face was mysterious and his eyes gleamed in his head. He raised his arm for silence, and then he spoke.

"Those are great gods, my brothers," he said, "gods powerful in spells and enchantments. We must do what we can to please them. If we aid them and worship them they will bring prosperity and good luck to the tribe. Go, one of you, and free them from their bonds, while others bring food and water that they may eat and drink."

The warriors sprang to do his bidding, already half-convinced that the two weird pale-faced people who had been found bound and alone in the deserted

village were beings from another world. What they were doing there, why they were in fetters: these questions did not trouble them. It was enough that they were there, old and white and mysterious, the last remnant of a departed people.

When at length the time came for the hunters to return to their village, the Witch Doctor gave them certain definite orders. The two strangers were to be left in their encampment, free and unharmed, and every month a party of warriors in full war-paint was to bring food and drink to them, together with anything else they might need. In this way, said the Medicine Man, they would become attached to the tribe and encouraged to work good for it.

So it was arranged, and when the hunters started out on the homeward trail they left behind them two aged, inexplicable beings, whose lives were henceforth bound up with the future of the tribe.

The strange, stone-built encampment on the fringe of the forest became a holy place to the men of the Lualaba, a Mecca to which they made frequent pilgrimage. Every month, a band of them, loaded with calabashes of water and palm wine, and bundles of manioc, plantains, and other fruit, set off through the jungle, along the now well-worn track, to visit the gods as the Witch Doctor had commanded. Every month they brought back news of the mysterious people: how they had received the gifts; what they were doing; if they were well. If they had risen to accept the food and wine, and had showed they were pleased with the offerings, there would be great rejoicing among the tribe, and dances that lasted well into the night. But if they

made no sign of pleasure, the whole village would be plunged into gloom, for such a reception betokened that the gods were angry and would not bring good fortune to the tribe.

The Witch Doctor never went himself to the home of the gods—or if he did he went surreptitiously, under cover of the darkness—but always before the warriors set out he called them together and uttered spells and incantations over them, to prepare them for a sight of the holy gods. Only the greatest men of the tribe, the elders who had proved themselves to be brave and wise and powerful, were allowed to go, and it was considered a great honour to be chosen for the task.

One time (said M'bopa) my grandfather was selected to be one of the favoured ones. He told my father what he found at the end of the journey, and many years later my father in his turn told me. The little village, no longer inhabited except by two old people who could not look after the whole of it, was derelict. The white houses no longer shone dazzlingly in the sunlight, but were cracked by the sun and rain that poured upon them. Creepers clambered over the roofs, digging their stubborn tentacles into the mud, searching for a stranglehold. Ferns grew from niches in the walls and dripped in green showers to the earth. Slowly, inevitably, Nature was reclaiming her own.

One house, however, stood upright, white, untouched by the advancing forest, with swept path and dusted walls—the house of the gods. The band of men approached it, bearing their gifts, and prostrated themselves before the uncovered door. They went inside. Inside, in the light which penetrated

the little windows, they could see two figures squatting on the trodden floor, white robes flowing round them, their faces pale in the flooding shaft of sunlight. About their feet lay calabashes, empty and overturned, and piles of food, fruit and leaves, and an occasional piece of rotting meat, the month-old relics of the last visit of the tribe.

My grandfather (so M'bopa said) walked with his comrades up to the crouching forms and laid his gifts at their feet. They nodded their heads slowly, sleepily, and did not raise their eyes. Quickly removing the ancient remnants of food and drink, the warriors backed away, out of the hut and into the air again. The gods were angry—had they not remained with downcast eyes when their food was brought?—and to appease them, meat must be brought, fresh meat newly killed, as a sacrifice and a propitiation.

Although religions in Africa are as diverse as the innumerable insects which thrive in the tropical heat, they have one thing in common, one link which binds them together. Each of the native gods, whether a tree or an animal, a rudely carved stone or a thundering cataract, is reckoned to be fundamentally evil, and has to be placated with acceptable offerings before its potentialities are changed from evil to good. Most tribes believe in a good spirit, invisible and omnipotent, who is supreme in the world, but he is never mentioned by name. It is only the lesser gods, who work and scheme to bring destruction on the village, who occupy their thoughts and worship. The supreme being is inviolate, he cannot be bribed or persuaded into a course of action; but the lesser ones, who dwell in strange places and

assume strange forms, can be bribed to work good, provided the bribe is sufficiently great.

I could see, therefore, how the gullible, superstitious natives of the Lualaba, once they had persuaded themselves that the two strangers were gods, believed that they would work evil unless they were appeased. It was to this end that the Witch Doctor had ordained the monthly visit into the forest, with gifts of food and wine.

So (continued M'bopa) for many, many moons the tribe continued to worship its new-found deities. And certainly the affairs of the village seemed to prosper. A raid on a tribe dwelling by the banks of the Lomami River brought many new women to the village, who became wives to the men and bore them many fine children. These women, too, soon becoming resigned to their new home, showed their husbands a different way of trapping fish in the river, a way which brought many a fine meal into the cooking-pot. The crops flourished. Animals suddenly seemed to haunt the vicinity, and the huntsmen seldom came home without a kill. It was a time of remarkable prosperity for the little tribe, and, of course, the two gods were held to be directly responsible.

Then, one day, came tragedy.

As usual the band of warriors, painted and bedecked with ornaments and gaily-coloured feathers, set off through the forest to the holy place of the gods, their hands full of gifts. As usual, they prostrated themselves before the doorway, and then pushed unhesitatingly inside. But this time no squatting figures awaited them, with raised eyes to show their pleasure, or downcast eyes if they were angered.

On the floor, surrounded by the usual conglomeration of pots and vegetables, were two little white bundles, motionless. Horrified, the foremost warrior stepped forward and gazed at them. The two gods of the Lualaba were dead. Silent and undisturbed they lay, their faces paler even than before, with nothing to show how they had met their death.

After a moment of stupefaction, the leader of the party spoke, and immediately one of the warriors rushed outside. In a few seconds the beating of a drum was heard, the quick, light rumble of fingers rapping on a stretched skin. The Witch Doctor and the rest of the tribe were being summoned to the home of the gods.

The sound, despite its lightness, must have penetrated far into the forest, for in a little while the waiting crowd of men, crouching in fearful anticipation outside the door of the hut, heard the sound of approaching feet and saw the long grasses round the encampment swaying as though to the tread of many bodies. Then out into the clearing came a long line of armed warriors—the rest of the Lualaba tribe—headed by the Medicine Man in full regalia, leopard's teeth clinking round his neck, a belt of striped okapi hide about his waist, and in his right hand a short dagger, curved slightly at the tip, its blade gleaming wickedly in the sun.

(This, incidentally, is how M'bopa's grandfather —who was alive at the time—described the Witch Doctor to his son, M'bopa's father, who in his turn described him to M'bopa. So the story is only third-hand. The whole tale of the Dried Head—apart from the little part I myself had played in it

—is similarly produced. It is therefore obvious that inevitably a few exaggerations or omissions will have occurred in the different narratives, and equally obvious that I myself am in no position to rectify them.)

Pushing his way through the group of huddled warriors, the Medicine Man went into the hut. He was there a long time, and the listeners heard a low chanting coming from within, a steady wail, neither rising nor falling, but keeping on one low note, on and on until their ears were filled with it and their senses reeled. When eventually he emerged, he carried something beneath one of the long white cloaks belonging to the gods, something so closely hidden by the thick folds of the robe that none of the warriors could catch a glimpse of it, although (negro-like) they peered curiously. He spoke to them, telling them that nothing more could be done. The shrine was a shrine no longer, for the gods had flown away, leaving only their wizened bodies to remind their worshippers of what had been. Then, bidding his men follow him, he turned on his heel and disappeared into the jungle.

So (M'bopa went on) the tribe no longer journeyed out to the fringe of the forest each month, to worship its strange gods. There was no longer any object in such an expedition. Instead, the men stayed at home, helping their wives to cultivate the soil and catch fish for the pot. But they still had their gods. What the Witch Doctor had carried home beneath the covering cloth was at length revealed. He had severed the heads of the two pale-faced people as they lay dead in the hut, had smoked them over a fire until they were dried and mummified, and

then had ordered the tribe to worship them as they had worshipped the living owners.

They became the most sacred relics that the tribe had ever possessed. A temple of sticks and mud, built in the shape of a low, leafy bower with a platform or shelf at one end, was made to house them ; and they were hung up inside, their wrinkled lips parted above yellow teeth, their dulled eyes sunk into the sockets. On the shelf before them gifts of wine and food were placed—as they had been placed in the hut in the forest, when the owners of the heads were still alive—handfuls of maize, bunches of bananas, fruits, and roots and berries. Once a month, instead of the long journey through the forest, a great dance was held in their honour, when sacrifices were offered and blood was shed. Sometimes an enemy was captured from a neighbouring tribe and killed to please the gods, and then there were great rejoicings. More often, animal flesh had to suffice. But whatever flesh it was, human or animal, that provided the sacrifice, the wild orgy continued until the participators were worn out, drunk with excitement and with the palm wine doled out by the Witch Doctor to stir the senses of his subjects, and fell to the ground to sleep their exhaustion away.

Year after year the same ritual continued. When crops were bad and fish scarce in the river, the gods were said to be angry, and human sacrifices had to be made to appease them and turn away their wrath. If no enemy was available, a young girl was chosen as the victim, and, hideous in his paraphernalia, the Witch Doctor would stand before her in the temple of the gods and slit her throat so that the

warm red blood ran over the sacred platform and spattered the holy relics on the wall. What happened to the body of the girl no one knew, although it was generally believed that the Witch Doctor feasted well on the day after the sacrifice. Sometimes, on the other hand, crops were good, and fish and flesh abundant, and the tribe knew that their gods were pleased and contented. On those occasions (as had been the case with my poor friend, ' Jim ') when an enemy was taken he was not used as a sacrifice, but eaten by the men of the tribe as though a gift from the gods.

Gradually, the two Dried Heads in the temple became accepted as the most potent force in the life of the Lualaba cannibals. As years passed, and the elders of the tribe died and new warriors took their place, the tale of the two pale-faced people grew more and more shadowy and obscure, until it became almost a legend. Only people like my grandfather (said M'bopa) who had lived at the time and passed down the tale to their sons managed to keep the story alive in the minds of the natives. And then, one fatal day, disaster came.

Suddenly one morning warning drums began to sound, beaten by the watchmen who stood on guard on the outskirts of the village. Their message told the listening warriors that a hostile force was approaching. Quickly they seized their spears and wicker shields, sending the women, not back into the huts (as is usually the custom among native tribes when war is imminent), but away into the forest, where they would be safely hidden if the village were invaded. Then, with painted faces and swinging necklaces of animal teeth and other talismans around

their necks, they set out to meet the foe threatening to destroy them.

Drums sounded, spears clashed, and the forest echoed to the yells of the attackers and the screams of the wounded; but although my fellows fought well (M'bopa continued), they could not hope to withstand warriors of twice their number and seemingly twice their size. Those of the tribe who were not killed fled into the depths of the forest and hid there trembling, while the victors marched into the empty village to take what they could find.

They found it deserted. No women cowered in the houses, to shrink from the enemies who approached them. No children fell terror-stricken at their feet. Scarcely anything of value remained, save one old woman, too stricken in years to flee with her companions, whom, angry and unsatisfied, they killed with one blow of the spear. Disappointed at the meagre results of their search, they must have gone over to the temple, for such they obviously knew it to be, to see what lay within. Inside, guarding his holy treasures, was the Witch Doctor, determined to defend them with his life.

What followed the tribe learned from a little boy who, when the enemy arrived, took refuge in the temple of the gods, and all the time lay crouching in a corner, seeing and yet unseen. Afterwards, when the tumult had died down and the villagers came creeping back to see what remained of their houses, he reported all that he had seen.

Hostile warriors have no fear of a Medicine Man who is not of their tribe. His magical power does not extend its influence over them, and so they do not stand in awe of him. The Witch Doctor knew

this, he knew the grave danger in which he was placed, but he was not afraid. Were not the mighty gods of the Lualaba beside him, and would they not rescue him from the approaching enemy ? He lifted up his hands in invocation, and called upon the Dried Heads to show their power and save him. The low chanting sound of his voice filled the temple.

Three warriors stepped over the threshold and confronted him. He laughed.

" You cannot kill me," he said. " My gods will save me. They will divert your arrows and hold back your spears so that the thrusts will recoil upon yourselves. You cannot harm me ! " And so profound was his faith in the holy relics, he turned his back upon his foes and lifted up his hands towards the gods.

It was the turn of the enemy warriors to laugh. They cared nothing for the weird objects hanging on the wall, save for their possible trading value. Stepping forward, one of them raised his spear and clubbed the Witch Doctor over the head with the shaft, as he stood invoking the aid of his deities. Convulsively he clutched one of them, and then fell like a log. The little watching boy, terrified out of his life, shut his eyes to prevent himself from calling out and so revealing his presence to the enemy. When he dared to open them again the warriors had vanished, taking with them one of the Dried Heads. The Witch Doctor lay motionless on the trampled ground, grasping the other Head, blood pouring from his head in a thick, crimson stream.

The remnant of the tribe, wounded, weary, despondent, stole back from the forest one by one,

horrified at the attack which had come so suddenly out of nowhere, to ruin their lives and devastate their village. They were met by the little boy, who told them what he had seen, and all together they rushed to the temple. It was as the boy had reported. On the ground, moaning faintly, lay the Witch Doctor, clutching one of the Heads in his hand. Of the other sacred relic there was no sign.

They lifted him as best they could, two warriors supporting him, one on each side, as he stood surveying the desecrated shrine. Then, suddenly, he seemed to recollect what had happened, how his gods had failed him just when he needed them most, how all these years he had been deluded into thinking that they were great and omnipotent. He raised himself, his lips curled angrily, and he proceeded to curse the gods which had failed him so dismally, with the most dreadul curse known to the tribe.

His voice trembling, he ordered his warriors to pull down the holy temple, the home of the mysterious gods, and make of the broken branches a great fire, whose glow would light up the heavens. Fearful of profaning the sacred place, yet even more fearful of disobeying the Witch Doctor's commands, they did as he ordered, tore down the sticks of the temple and made of them a great pyre in the middle of the village. When it was finished, and yellow flames were licking the branches, he lifted the Dried Head which he held and cast it into the glowing depths. Then he spoke :

" Cursed be the false gods of the Lualaba ! " he chanted, " and cursed be all who lay hands upon the lost relic and bring it back to the village ! For it is

the most powerful and evil *ju-ju* in the forest, and the curse shall fall on all who dare to return it. Soon or late it may fall, when the finder least expects ; but fall it will, and in its train will come death. Death ! Death ! DEATH ! " His voice rose to a shriek as he uttered the last three words ; his eyes rolled wildly in his head ; and then he shrieked once again, a long-drawn-out scream, high and very shrill, and collapsed at the feet of his followers, dead. The false gods had claimed their first victim. The curse had begun to work.

So (concluded M'bopa) our eyes were opened to the falseness of the holy talismans, and after a time the memory of them faded a little. The new Witch Doctor (the man who had been chosen for the position by means of the contest of magic and skill which I have described in a previous chapter) was anxious, however, to gain the prestige which his predecessor had enjoyed, and so he continued to warn his subjects that anyone who brought back the lost Head to the village would suffer the doom of the curse. Instead of the ceremonial dance each month in praise of the holy relics, he instituted a new ritual, during which the curse was re-uttered and the burning of the remaining Head was re-enacted, while from time to time a young maiden was sacrificed in order to propitiate the evil spirits who dwelt in the Head and urge them to keep far away from the village. (Needless to say, on that day the Witch Doctor feasted well into the night.)

Gradually the negroes became so absorbed in their new ceremony that they forgot how it had originated. The stolen Head became a legend, used to frighten small boys at the time of their initiation

as warriors ; and few men remembered (the African native's memory is notoriously short) the days when they had worshipped the gods they now shunned. It was left to you, Master (concluded M'bopa), to remind them.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

IN SEARCH OF THE LOST TRIBE

WHEN at length I had pieced together M'bopa's words into one continuous narrative, I began to understand many things which had been puzzling me. The Dried Head, which I still kept hung up in my hut, assumed a new significance. I knew now why M'bopa seemed to stand so much in awe of it, why he refused to touch it and shrank away when I picked it up. I understood the stupefaction of the tribe and the Witch Doctor when it had been found in my canoe, and why it had been thrust into my hands before my departure. It had undoubtedly saved my life, and yet, according to the superstitious natives, the possession of it meant that I was doomed to death by the power of the curse. Well, the curse had not fallen upon me yet. I was free to roam the forest or live in my little hut, as I pleased. And I meant to enjoy myself as long as I could.

M'bopa's story interested me. I thought of the deserted village, with its rows of white houses and its cleanly-swept paths, empty, silent, unoccupied; of the two old people, alone in their house, abandoned by the rest of their tribe, presumably waiting for death; of the Dried Heads, hung up and worshipped and then suddenly repudiated because they failed

to save the Witch Doctor from destruction. I wondered why the Witch Doctor had been so struck by the two old people that he had ordered the tribe to worship them as gods. What was there about them that awoke his awe and reverence? What race did they belong to, and where had their fellows gone? My curiosity, always active, mounted high, and my brain reeled with questions and suppositions. At length I made up my mind: I would go to the deserted village and attempt to trace the whereabouts of the vanished tribe.

I communicated my idea to M'bopa. Would he be able, and willing, to take me to the place where his tribe had first come upon the little stone houses and the two deserted 'gods'? Could he lead me there, even though we had wandered so many miles from the Lualaba, out into the trackless wastes of the jungle?

He looked somewhat dubious at first, obviously reluctant to leave his little hut in the heart of the forest, with its rush-strewn floor and plaited walls, for the mysterious village on the fringe of the grassland. I decided to play upon his feelings.

"Perhaps you couldn't find the way?" I ventured. "It is a long way from here to the grassland, and the forest is thick and trackless."

His queer native pride was aroused at once, as I had meant it to be. To be accused of not being able to find a way through the forest is one of the greatest slurs on an African's woodcraft, and M'bopa was quick to see the insult in my words.

"I will take you there before the next new moon," he said. "Long ago, when my fathers and their fathers went regularly to the village to worship their

false gods, there was a track through the forest, well-marked and easy to follow. Though weeds have grown over it, I shall still be able to find the way."

So it was decided, and the next morning, almost before dawn had broken, while the forest was still fresh from the coolness of night, we left the little huts in which we had lived for so many happy months and started off to look for the lost tribe.

For days we plunged through the undergrowth, until I had lost all count of time. M'bopa led the way, sure of his direction, and I followed. He carried with him a *kasba*, a slender bamboo cane, and from time to time he put it to the ground, with his ear against the other end, and listened for footfalls. Had there been anyone about, he would have heard his tread although miles distant, for the cane acted like a microphone and picked up all sounds on the earth. When night fell we would climb a convenient tree and settle ourselves in its fork, safe from prowling creatures, with the moon-tipped leaves swaying round us and lulling us to sleep with their soft whispers. Sometimes there would be a stealthy rustle in the branches, and I would open my eyes and try to peer through the darkness at the snake which I felt sure must be uncoiling itself near by; but experience had taught me that few animals—or reptiles—strike unless they are deliberately attacked, and, finding that I did not stir, the snake—if snake it was—glided away and left me alone.

As we journeyed farther eastward, a direction which I was able roughly to gauge by the sun, big-game became more numerous. We had to ford many

marshes, fringed with rushes and papyrus, and bearing on their muddy surfaces the imprint of innumerable feet ; for to these still swamps, disturbed only by the hum of a thousand winged creatures, the animals of the forest came down at dusk to drink their fill.

Elephants, especially, were numerous. It was the mating season, and the large males were fighting for supremacy, for the mastery and leadership of the herd. I had never before had a chance to study the habits of these great pachyderms closely, and I decided to dawdle a little on the way and watch them. They were too excited, too intent on their mighty combats, to allow me to approach and attempt to make friends with them, as I had once done with the kings of the forest, the mighty gorilla, so I climbed the trees around their fighting-ground and watched from a safe distance.

The period of fighting seemed to last about six weeks. Stamping and trumpeting, the huge males ran at each other, butting with their foreheads, goring each other with their powerful tusks. Sometimes one would curl his trunk round a great tree, tear it up by the roots, and bring it, branches, roots, and all, crashing down upon the head of his adversary. Another, relying more upon his own strength, would force his foe to the ground and then kneel upon him, endeavouring to crush out his life with his huge knees. It was amazing to see a dozen of these forest monsters solemnly waltzing round each other in an attempt to find a vital hold, and yet it was tragic, too. Several of the elephants were killed in the struggle, others were maimed for life, and many a long gash, dripping with blood, showed where the

grey skin had been relentlessly ripped by a pointed tusk. While all round the clearing the trampled earth, the uprooted trees and mashed undergrowth testified to the dreadful, gigantic tourney that had been taking place.

At length only one big bull remained, torn and bleeding, one eye missing, one long yellow tusk ripped out, his hide gashed in a dozen places, his trunk—the tenderest part of an elephant's anatomy—red and raw. He was now lord of the herd, by virtue of his victory in the mortal combat, master of the troop of frightened, adoring cows, and for that coming season he was the only male who was allowed to breed.

M'bopa, now that he had decided to show me the way to the deserted village, was all anxiety to succeed, and his impatience as I idled along the way, watching the battles of the elephants, or studying the insect life that seethed all round, became at length so overwhelming that for very humanity I could not dawdle further. So, when the victorious old bull elephant had slowly limped off with his retinue of faithful cows into the depths of the forest, in search of the tender, succulent shoots of the bamboo—the pachyderm's favourite food—I told M'bopa that I was now ready to proceed with the quest on which we were bound.

All the time, as we pushed our way through the matted undergrowth, or followed the animal tracks that wound here and there beneath the trees, I kept my eyes and ears open for signs of the gorilla, those mighty beasts of the jungle who will always lie nearest to my heart. Sometimes I thought I saw signs of their presence and my heart leapt; but

although I called to them, in the language I remembered so well, although I walked out into the middle of grassy glades, beating my breast and uttering the old familiar roar, it brought no answer. No shaggy head peeped out from the tangled bushes, and only the vaulted roof of the forest gave back my cry.

When he first saw the strange sight of a white man imitating the roar of an ape, M'bopa was terrified. That it was a good imitation was testified by the behaviour of the monkeys and the birds, all of whom fled shrieking and screaming from the tree-tops in the immediate vicinity, certain that one of the great apes was on the warpath ; and the black man was extremely impressed. He seemed to imagine that I, like the Witch Doctor, was a human being with the soul of a gorilla, and that when night fell I resumed my animal shape and growled, ape-like, in the woods ; and it took me quite a long time to reassure him. I think I managed to convince him at last that I was wholly human, but nevertheless for many days afterwards I caught him looking at me with awe and suspicion, wondering if the shaggy black coat of a gorilla would suddenly appear on me, before his eyes.

After we had been wrestling our way through the forest for what seemed a period of many weeks, existing on palm cabbages, which M'bopa cut from the tops of palm trees—shinning up them like a monkey—palm nuts, roots, and berries, the forest began to grow thinner ; glades, carpeted with smooth green grass, became more and more frequent ; and the trees no longer met and entwined their branches overhead, but left spaces through which the tropical

sun shone relentlessly. Travelling became arduous, and I was very thankful that M'bopa—for some reason best known to himself—had brought poor 'Jim's' sun-helmet with him when he left the village. Unlike him, I had no woolly hair to keep the rays from my head; but the lopi did its work well, and I never once suffered from sun-stroke.

One morning, just as dawn was rising, we climbed down from our tree-top resting-place and prepared to continue the journey. Now that the branches no longer formed a sufficiently thick canopy to protect our heads from the sun, we found ourselves more and more frequently forced to rest from the march during the noon-tide heat, and so we formed the habit of rising early, in order to travel as far as possible before the sun had reached its full strength. Early morning, before the sun was up, and late afternoon, when the air was cool and fresh with the promise of night, were the times when we journeyed farthest.

We had gone, on this particular morning, scarcely one hour's distance, picking our way carefully among the swamps—where huge snails, as big as lizards, crawled painfully over the mud, leaving long silver trails of slime in their wake; and where piles of elephant dung lay steaming in the still morning air—when all at once, with amazing abruptness, as though cut off with a gigantic cake-knife, the forest came to an end, and we found ourselves confronted by wide, rolling plains, whose miles of soft grass, almost head-high, stretched away to the distant mountains, relieved here and there by the gigantic, gnarled shape of a baobab tree.

We plunged into it, and in a minute were drenched through by the dew which still clung to the grass. In showers so heavy that they might almost have been rain, it poured upon us, and the sun, which now shone down quite unchecked, brought out the moisture in clouds of hot steam, until the atmosphere around us was nearly too thick to breathe.

M'bopa, however, seemed to feel little discomfort. He wore the minimum of clothes—nothing but a slender strip of hide round his middle, and the rows of gleaming necklaces, bones and beads and animal teeth, to which he still clung—and I, too, had discarded everything but the sun-helmet and an extremely ragged pair of trousers, the retention of which, I felt, preserved my dignity in the eyes of my black companion. Now that we had left the gloom of the forest behind us and were out in the freedom of the grassland, M'bopa seemed to feel a strange exhilaration. He leapt along, from time to time putting his *kasba* to the ground to listen for footsteps ; rushing with wild whoops after a herd of giraffe, which suddenly appeared on the sky-line and cantered off with the peculiar, unhurried grace that always comes as something of a shock when one remembers their ungainly, cumbersome appearance when standing still or straddling to browse and drink ; disappearing occasionally into the forest which we still kept on our left as we moved northwards, and emerging with his arms full of fruits and tender green shoots which he proceeded to offer me.

From his high spirits, I gathered that we were nearing the site of the deserted village, the original

home of the false gods of the Lualaba, and my curiosity which, owing to the innumerable interesting sights which I had seen on the journey, had waned a little, rose rapidly. Now at last I was to see the place where the two mysterious 'gods' had dwelt, the home of the lost tribe, that strange race of men in search of whom 'Jim' and I had come such a long way, and because of whom, indirectly, my poor companion had lost his life.

On our left the forest loomed darkly. On our right the grassland stretched in green undulations to the purple hills that veiled the skyline like a mist. An occasional turfy hillock, topped by a spreading baobab, obscured the view, and, surmounting one of these, we looked down at a little wooded hollow, whose trees stretched almost to the fringe of the forest. In among the foliage, half-hidden by the clambering lianas, was a glimpse of white stone. M'bopa gave a shout, and pointed out the sight with a trembling, excited finger. We had reached the deserted village at last!

Many of the houses were still standing, although the walls and roofs were crumbling, and scarred with rust-coloured lichen and spongy green moss, and a troop of monkeys fled from inside them as we approached. Examining the buildings closely, I saw that they were made of mud bricks, baked—presumably by the sun—to a brittle hardness, and welded with mud that had dried into a stiff cement. In many cases the roofs had fallen in, and walking through the open doorways I saw that the walls were of two thicknesses, and that the houses were divided into two rooms with a thin partition down the middle. Vines and lianas waved their fronds

inside and out, their clinging tendrils searching blindly for a stranglehold on the bricks. Grass paved the floors. Any paths that might once have been marked out in front of the houses were no longer distinguishable, but were a mass of weeds and briars. It was a derelict village indeed.

With an inscrutable look on his face, M'bopa led me past the rows of dilapidated houses, on towards a building that seemed somehow cleaner and newer than the rest. The roof was still in place, and fewer creepers clambered over the walls. A little stone path, overgrown with lichen but still visible, led the way up to the door. We had reached the house of the gods.

M'bopa hung back a little. Obviously he was afraid lest the Witch Doctor's curse should extend to the deserted village where the gods had once lived, and afraid, too, of the consequences that might ensue if I were to take the Dried Head into the house. His faith in me, however, overcame his fear. He seemed to have made up his mind that I was mightier than the cursed relic. For months we had both lived in its company without any disastrous results : we were both healthy ; jungle fever had so far passed us by ; food and water were always to be had in abundance. So, after a short demur, and casting one apprehensive glance at the Head that dangled from my waist, he followed me through the door into the hut.

There was nothing to see. A few calabash pots, wrinkled and twisted, lay on the floor, covered with dirt and dust, left where presumably the last band of worshippers had dropped them when they found,

to their horror, that the gods were dead. A short, blunt instrument, made of stone and shaped something like a pestle, was near by and had obviously been used for pounding corn. But apart from those two pathetic relics, the little two-roomed hut was completely empty. If anything had remained after the death of the two old inhabitants to show what tribe they belonged to, and where their fellows had gone, marauding natives had taken it away, and left the house completely desolate.

That night, instead of choosing a forked tree for my resting-place, I slept in the home of the false gods of the Lualaba tribe. M'bopa, whose trust in me did not extend thus far, kept guard outside. Night-time, he knew, was the hour when evil spirits walked abroad under cover of the darkness, and what place more likely for them to haunt than their one-time home? He begged me not to risk my life in such a foolhardy way, and was incredibly relieved when morning dawned and he found me none the worse for my experience.

Having reached the deserted village, and seen with my own eyes the hut where the owner of the mysterious Dried Head had once lived, I was more than ever determined to trace the tribe from which he had sprung. Such a quest was, after all, the primary reason for my visit with 'Jim' to Africa, and I felt I owed it to the memory of my poor friend to fulfil it. More and more I began to feel that perhaps some strange lost tribe *did* dwell in the heart of the Dark Continent, and wander among its primeval forests and rolling grassy plains. African exploration was only as yet in its infancy. Parts of the country had still never been penetrated by a

white man, and were the home of innumerable sinister legends and dark speculations. Why should not I, by the amazing occurrences in which I had participated in the circus, have stumbled into the midst of a mystery whose unravelling would be of value and interest to the whole of the rest of the world? Having come so far, I felt that at least it was my duty to attempt to find the tribe which had departed so suddenly from the village, and left the two old people to starve alone.

There was nothing in the deserted village, no shred of evidence, although I searched carefully in every nook and cranny, to show what tribe the two 'gods' belonged to, or where their companions had gone; and I began to question M'bopa carefully about the possible direction which the migrating tribe had taken. At first his reluctance even to speak about the subject was manifest. He had brought me to the deserted village chiefly to vindicate himself as a woodsman in my eyes, but he had pledged himself no further and he was obviously disinclined to continue the search.

With his unwillingness, however, my curiosity naturally grew. I was determined, more than ever, to seek for the lost tribe: I would go even if he refused to accompany me, and I told him so. I even made a show of shaking his hand, European-like, in farewell, and setting off along the trail, alone.

My gesture had the desired effect. His loyalty to me—amazing, considering that I had been cursed by the Witch Doctor and was therefore *taboo*—his fear of being left alone in the deserted village, his reluctance to search for the tribe, the finding of

which might bring down the curse upon his own head: all these considerations swayed him. At length, seeing that I definitely intended to go, he stopped shaking his head and saying: "I don't know," (the negro's inevitable answer when he does not wish to reply) and began to look a little sheepish. I seized my advantage and pressed it home, beginning to question him closely about the direction the tribe was supposed to have taken.

All at once he gave up all pretence of ignorance, and collapsed like a pricked baloon. He ran after me, a beseeching look in his eyes.

"I will tell you, Master," he said. "Only, bad spirits live among that tribe, and it is not safe for us to go there. But if you insist, Master, I will come with you, and tell you all I know."

I told him that he had nothing to fear.

"I will keep the spirits from harming you," I promised him. "I am a white man, immune from all their spells and enchantments. Their curses cannot harm me; they fall from my head like dead leaves from the top of a tree. You need not be afraid. Only tell me all you know about the tribe and all will be well."

My words, and the loyalty which M'bopa felt towards me, at length outweighed his fears, and he proceeded to tell me the one thing about which up till now he had professed complete ignorance: the direction in which the lost tribe had gone. Even now, and quite genuinely, I thought, he could only tell me the direction from which they had *come*. We had to assume that they were returning to their old home.

The information had come, apparently, from the

two old people, who had told it to the Witch Doctor. Their minds were a little hazy, their memories short, but they recollected faintly a long trek through the forests and grassland some years before and could still remember the way they had marched.

Each morning, so they said, directly the sun rose, they began to travel, keeping the sun always on their shield-arms. When the sun reached its hottest period and was shining directly above them, they rested for a while until it had moved across the sky and afforded them a little relief. Then, this time keeping the sun upon their spear-arms, then continued the march until night fell, when they lit fires and made camp. So they continued for the length of sixty days.

" Thus," said M'bopa, " perhaps by signs, perhaps by words—though in what language I do not know—the two gods told the Witch Doctor, the Mighty One of the tribe, how they had journeyed down from their homeland to the place at the fringe of the forest where they built their village, the village in which we are now standing, Master. Maybe they returned whence they came, maybe they found new lands. I do not know. No one knows. But that is all the story."

And with that I had to be content. At least M'bopa's tale had told me a little. If the strangers had marched in the early morning with the sun upon their shield—or left—arms, had rested at noon and then marched again in the afternoon with the sun on their spear—or right—arms, it meant, seeing that this part of Africa was almost directly on the Equator, that they had journeyed almost due

south. Well, I would do the same. Reversing the procedure, I would march northwards for sixty days, the sun on my right in the mornings and after noon on my left, and see if I came upon any traces of the mysterious lost tribe.

CHAPTER TWELVE

THE END OF THE SEARCH

EARLY the next morning, as soon as we could see the sun rising over the grassy horizon, tingeing the distant mountains with its crimson rays, we started off. There was nothing to keep us in the deserted village, no need for further search among the dilapidated brick houses, and I was eager to be gone. We took nothing with us, no supplies of food or calabashes of water, relying solely on what we would be able to find on the journey. Only on my head I wore ' Jim's ' sun-helmet, partly for sentimental reasons and partly to protect my head from the glare of the sun over the shadeless grasslands, and slung round my waist the Dried Head. M'bopa had a rudely-shaped knife at his skin belt, and carried his *kasba*—the listening cane—in his hand.

Keeping the sun on our right, we marched steadily northwards. It was comparatively easy going. The grassland stretched before us in a long, unbroken, undulating wave of pale greyish-green. In places it was nearly eight feet high, and formed a thick screen all round us. Elsewhere it was little more than luxuriant turf, mingled with a scrub of thorn bushes about four feet high, known as the ' Wait-a-bit Thorn.' But whatever height the grass was,

it was interspersed here and there with a number of tracks, made by men or animals, which we could easily use and yet still maintain our right direction northwards.

The grassland was teeming with all manner of game. Often, climbing one of the scattered trees in the cool of the evening, to sweep my eyes over the distant horizon with its bank of purple mountains, I would see a herd of brindled gnu, those strange animals, half-horse and half-deer, with equine faces and tails and inward-curving horns, known to the Dutch as *wildebeest.* A troop of zebra—of which there are many varieties—their striped hides scarcely visible in the downward-slanting rays of the evening sun, would be grazing near by. Sassabies pricked their ears and looked at us, their jaws eternally munching, ready to dart away like arrows if we showed signs of hostility. Springbok and other antelope were swift to scent our approach.

Perhaps, surmounting a grassy hillock, we would find a giraffe straddling in ungainly fashion across the pool at its feet, intent on a long refreshing drink, but not too intent to perceive our coming, when it whipped up its velvet-horned head, and loped swiftly away. Giraffe seemed to me to be the most extraordinary creatures ever created. To begin with, they are voiceless. Whether in pain or danger, they cannot utter a cry ; they must suffer all things in silence, dumb. Then, too, they seldom put their lips to the ground ; save for the purpose of drinking, when they stretch out their legs awkwardly, they live on the young shoots of the trees, protruding their long necks towards the choicest morsels of foliage. They eat such a vast quantity of this sweet young

greenstuff that they seem to exude a delightful smell of scented herbs through their hide. A captive giraffe smells as pungent as most caged beasts, but a giraffe in its wild state has one of the most pleasant scents imaginable.

Occasionally, perched aloft in a baobab tree, I used to hear a sound as of nearby thunder and, peering through the grasses, would see an old lion crouched tight on its stomach, head back, muscles contracted tautly, letting out roar after roar, as though trying to belch out its very entrails. The roar of the wild lion is a most terrifying sound to hear, and the whole plain seemed to stand still at the awe-inspiring, earthly thunder.

The lion's method of attacking game is conducted not without thought, and on rare occasions I was able to watch the business and marvel at the beast's sagacity. It would approach a herd of *wildebeest* or zebra on the up-wind, so that the animals could get its smell, while the lioness, who always helps her mate in the endless search for food, stole down-wind and lurked in the long grass. As soon as the zebra smelled the lion they galloped off in the opposite direction—down-wind. The lioness waited tense ready to make the kill, and her work was done swiftly and surely. Choosing the finest animal of the herd, she dashed out from her hiding-place, and sprang on to its withers, biting and scratching the striped hide. Then, with her mighty forepaw, she struck the terrified creature across the neck with such a gigantic blow that its spinal column was broken and it died instantaneously.

As soon as the rest of the zebra herd had galloped away affrighted and the plain was empty, all the

lions within calling distance gathered round to share the kill. With tails lashing, jaws working, they tore the warm flesh from the dead zebra, roaring, grunting, growling the while. Had I not known that a lion is not always fortunate in its nightly prowls and cannot always rely on making a kill, I would have been amazed at the amount which the huge cats managed to swallow. But, like negroes, they eat mightily when food is available, and starve mightily when it is not.

When the lions had eaten their fill and had slunk away to sleep, a horde of scavengers came out to pick the bones. Jackals and cowardly hyenas appeared as if from nowhere, to take what the lordly lion chose to reject. Vultures, at first mere specks in the sky many miles away, alighted and picked at the eye-sockets for stray pieces of gristle. When dawn came there was nothing left of the zebra, which had been grazing so cheerfully a few hours earlier, save a skeleton, picked clean of meat, its white bones drying rapidly in the sun.

For all grass-eating animals, the time of danger on the plains—as in the forest—is just before dawn and just after sunset. Then their enemies are on the prowl, hungry for meat ; and against those mighty fangs and unsheathed, ripping claws, they have little chance of survival. But the carnivora themselves do not have a very easy life. Always they are searching for water, and they will travel many, many miles to find it. It is not particularly pleasant to see a herd of lions—the acknowledged Kings of the Plain—scratching painfully at a dried-up water-hole in the hope that a little moisture may still lurk in the depths. Nor is it pleasant to see them lying

under a scanty thorn-bush in the noontide heat, in an attempt to find a little bit of shade, panting, panting, endlessly.

Sometimes, for it was the dry season, we saw herds of elephants, two hundred of them together, migrating from one place to another. They were always led by the older animals, and particularly the big bull of the herd, who commanded them, who knew the ropes and had been the same way before. Elephants will travel a long way for green pastures and water, especially the latter, as they are very fond of bathing, drawing the water up in their trunks and squirting it in long, cool showers over their wrinkled hides. Sometimes, if our nightly resting-place in the fork of a tree happened to overlook a little river, we would see the herd travelling by the light of the moon across the stream. Splashing through the water, they shambled over the sand-banks and mud-flats, journeying with incredible speed towards their destination.

Used as I was to pushing my way through the depths of the forest, climbing over fallen trees, hacking my way through the tangled lianas, skirting the reed-fringed swamps with their noisome smells and lurking crocodiles, avoiding the thorny scrub and briars as best I might, this march over miles of waving grassland was delightful. The only trial was the complete absence of shade. After marching for about four hours in the morning, I found the sun's heat too much for me—in spite of ' Jim's ' sun-helmet—and usually, when a baobab appeared, with its promise of cool shade, I left the track and lay down beneath its spreading branches, while the sun shone as usual pitilessly overhead.

As I lay idle, watching the shadows rippling like water on the burning ground, I began to speculate once again on the nature and identity of the people for whom M'bopa and I were searching. Suddenly a thought struck me. According to the two ' gods,' the lost tribe had also been forced to rest during the noontide heat. That meant they were not negroes. Negroes, with their woolly hair and hard heads, are able to endure the heat of the tropical sun when Europeans sink down exhausted. They are born to it and think nothing of it. Therefore, I argued to myself, the mysterious tribe was not negroid, but belonged to some other race. Was it possible that it really was a tribe of lost people, white men who by some mysterious means had found their way into the heart of Africa ?

After a while, I began to lose count of time. Was it twenty or twenty-one days since we had set off from the deserted village ? It was important that I remember, for the journey was said to be a sixty days' one and I wanted to know roughly when we were nearing our destination. Accordingly, I took a bamboo cane and began to notch it—one notch for each day—to tell the passing of time.

For days we marched on in this fashion, from dawn till about ten o'clock and from four until darkness made further progress impossible. Our direction was northwards the whole way, and after a while, as the grassland curled away to the east and the forest followed it, we found ourselves once more entering the gloomy shades, where perpetual twilight reigned, and where the damp smell of rotting vegetation assailed our nostrils ceaselessly. There was no sound as we pressed through the undergrowth, save

the constant dripping of water, and the occasional crash, reverberating through the forest, of a giant tree falling to the ground. The cough of a troop of monkeys, high up among the branches, the twitterings of hundreds of bejewelled birds, the hum and buzz of insects : these sounds were so common that I took no notice of them. We might have been walking in a hush as complete as death. The darkness, too, was so profound that often we could see no vestige of the sun between the entwining branches, and I sent M'bopa shinning up a tree to see if we were still maintaining the right direction.

When there were forty-five notches on my bamboo cane I began to feel excited. If M'bopa's information were correct, we should by now be nearing our destination. I had no idea of the distance we had travelled. Penetrating the forest is the slowest and most arduous business imaginable. Sometimes the bush was so dense, so full of briars and brambles, that it took us a day to go a mile ; or perhaps a river would suddenly appear across our path and we had to move up or down its banks in search of a fording-place. At other times we struck lucky : animal tracks wound away in the right direction and we were able to follow them easily through the matted undergrowth. In the end, when eventually the close of the search came in sight, I had no idea where in the whole of the vastness of Central Africa we were.

One morning—when I had cut the fifty-second notch in my bamboo the night before—it happened that M'bopa and I rested longer than usual at noon. The insects had been more troublesome than was their habit, and both the black man and I—although M'bopa, of course, was more hardened to

mosquito stings than I was—felt disposed to rest longer in the forks of our trees. We did not feel worried at the waste of time, however. Away in front of us, stretching due north, was a forest path, about four yards in width, which showed us that for some way, at any rate, the going would be easy. We stayed aloft in our perches and dozed gently.

The wind swayed the tree-tops, and the sun, although only just past its hottest, could not penetrate the forest twilight. I sighed happily, and stretched my limbs as well as I could in my cramped position. This was indeed the life for me, I said to myself. What did it matter whether or no we found the lost tribe at the end of our journey ? To live in the forest, free and untrammelled, as naturally and lawlessly as the wild beasts themselves, that was a good enough end in itself. Softly, seductively, the breeze rocked me to slumber.

All at once my half-sleep was rudely interrupted and I started up, suddenly wide awake, shaking the unkempt hair from my eyes. Was it my imagination, always vivid in the gloomy, unreal atmosphere of the jungle, or could I really hear the sound of tramping feet coming through the forest ? I looked at M'bopa. He, too, had noticed the sound, the first of its kind to assail our ears for many a long month, and in his native fashion was guessing at its cause. So we crouched, each in our separate fork, waiting for what might appear out of the long avenue of trees beneath.

The tramping came nearer and nearer, and there rose through the stillness of the woods, the sound of voices. There was, too, the crash and crackle of undergrowth. Evidently the newcomers did not

consider themselves to be in any danger from hostile enemies, for they were taking no pains to hide their presence. Then, all at once, there emerged from the forest gloom a band of men, men in long, yellowish-white robes, sandals bound across their feet and turbans wound round their heads. Above their black beards I saw that their skin was of a pale coffee-colour, almost saffron. My heart thumped suddenly. Had Fate ordained that we should meet, even earlier than we had expected, the mysterious lost tribe?

They appeared to have been on a hunting expedition, for the majority of them carried spears or short, curved swords, and in the midst of them were four negroes with two long poles across their shoulders, from which hung the carcase of an antelope-like creature. As they passed beneath the tree in which I crouched, some of them began to chant a song, their voices low and not unpleasant.

I looked at M'bopa, and to my amazement he was trembling all over. He caught my eye and made a tentative, half-fearful gesture towards the Dried Head dangling at my waist, and then pointed to the white-robed figures marching below. If I were still a little sceptical, he was already firmly convinced that we had come across the lost tribe, and the thought of what they might do to him was causing him the acutest terror.

My mind, however, was made up. If the men now disappearing into the gloom ahead were indeed members of the tribe we had come all this way to seek, it was stupid to let them go without having speech with them. As soon as the last of them had been swallowed up by the arching trees, therefore,

I slipped down from my perch, motioning to M'bopa to follow me. He slid down a little fearfully, looking with distrustful eyes towards the bend in the forest track which hid the band of huntsmen from view.

"I shall follow them," I whispered in his ear. "Will you come with me, or do you prefer to stay here in the forest, alone?"

He shook his head doubtfully.

"What can I do, Master?" he answered. "I am afraid to go after Them, and I am afraid to be left alone here. Well," with a shrug of resignation, "a man can only die once. I will come with you, Master."

Together we crept down the track. Ahead of us, vaguely discernible between the tall, smooth columns of the trees, were the white-clad figures, making no attempt to hide themselves, certain of their way, obviously in no fear whatsoever of discovery. The sound of their chanting came back to us through the stillness of the forest.

For about two miles we travelled thus, along the beaten track, and then suddenly the forest seemed to slip away, as though we were reaching the edge of the grassland. The undergrowth became sparse, green turf taking the place of the matted briars and lianas; the tree-tops drew apart to let the daylight through; the path grew wider and wider. Cautiously we crept on.

There was less cover now, and had the men in front chosen to turn their heads, they could hardly have helped but see us following in their footsteps. In order to safeguard ourselves against possible attack, therefore, we lagged behind more and more, certain that, however far in the rear, we could not

lose the band of huntsmen marching along so unconcernedly about three hundred yards in front.

Then, all at once, with complete unexpectedness as we rounded a bend in the path, civilization burst upon us. We crouched behind a broad-trunked acacia and gazed open-mouthed at the sight before our eyes.

We were on the edge of a huge clearing, so vast that it seemed more like the beginning of the grassland, only the shadow of tall trees in the background showing that the forest enclosed it on all sides. It was walled round with a bank of dried earth as high or higher than our heads, which in its turn was protected by a deep ditch, and only the fact that from our vantage-point we happened to be looking straight through a gate in the wall—a gate made of wattle and about four yards wide—enabled us to see into the village. I caught a glimpse of fields, divided with low wattle hedges, in which a few scrawny cattle grazed placidly, and away in the centre a cluster of houses, straight and square and shining saffron-coloured in the afternoon sun, protected by clumps of feathery acacia. Smoke curled like blue mist into the windless air. Down the centre of the clearing, from the gate, between the fields to the village, stretched a path, paved with large, flat stones in whose cracks bright-green grass-tufts grew, and along this the troop of huntsmen were now marching with their kill.

I decided to follow them.

Taking my courage in both hands, I stepped out from the shelter of the acacia and laid my hand on the wattle gate. M'bopa followed me fearfully, seeking my protection and yet afraid of the con-

sequences that might follow my venturesome act. The gate gave easily to the pressure of my fingers and, with the black man close at my heels, I walked through. It swung to behind me with a little creaking sound, as the primitive hinges rasped on the wooden posts; but no one appeared. My heart thumped heavily. For good or for ill, whatever the consequences, I had burned my boats. I was now in the village of the mysterious lost tribe.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE MYSTERIOUS LOST TRIBE

WE had not proceeded far along the pathway that led between the fields to the centre of the clearing, when we appeared to be noticed by some of the members of the village, for about half a dozen of them suddenly came into sight and began walking down the path towards us. The late afternoon sun shone down upon their flowing white robes, that draped them blanket-like, and upon their swathed turbans. Slowly, statelily, they approached.

They came up to us, and for the first time, as they halted in front of me, I was able to study them closely. They resembled Arabs more than any other race of people I knew, with the same lean, oval faces, aquiline noses and straight foreheads; but their complexions were smoother and less swarthy than that of the average Arab or Egyptian, being of a pale brown, almost yellow tint, and their eyes, though black and piercing, seemed less cruel beneath the black, bushy brows. When the leader of them opened his mouth to speak, I saw that his teeth were brilliantly white. He spoke, and the words he uttered were Arabic!

Fortunately for me, from my earliest years I have had a smattering of Arabic, not, of course, in its

purest form, but in the corrupt dialect of the Arabian and half-caste sailors who used to frequent the quayside taverns in Valetta. Maltese, too, is itself fundamentally allied to Arabic, and I have always found myself understood in the coastal towns of Africa, where a debased form of the language is used almost exclusively. When, therefore, I heard the familiar words of polite greeting issuing from the mouth of the spokesman of the party, I heaved a sigh of relief. At least, I thought to myself, I would be able to make myself understood by the mysterious white tribesmen, and would be in a position to state my case and explain my presence, without being immediately seized and marched off into captivity.

"*Salaam malerhum* (good-day to you)," I said, bowing low in Arab fashion, and quite unconscious of the absurd figure I must have cut in my torn and ragged trousers and 'Jim's' sun-helmet. Nakedness in the forest was so usual for me that I had forgotten all about it. Even the flowing robes of the newcomers did not awaken me to my incongruity.

The result of my words was amazing. As I gathered afterwards, the men were surprised enough to discover that the two strangers were one a white man and the other a negro. When they found that I could speak a language which resembled their own nearly enough to make myself understood, their astonishment was doubled. Without another word they escorted M'bopa and me down the pathway, to where the houses—about a hundred of them—clustered together in the middle of the clearing in neat little rows.

Mostly they were square, two-storied structures, built of sun-dried mud bricks of a light greyish

colour, with flat roofs and little glassless windows in the top storeys, which were shuttered up at night to keep out any unwelcome intruders. Sometimes an outside stairway led to the upper floor, which had a sort of rough balcony all round it, made occasionally of wood, but more often of the hardened mud. In front of the open doorways, cleaning the pathways or grinding corn in earthen mortars, stood groups of women, wearing long, greyish-coloured robes, some with their heads covered, some with their long, smooth black hair exposed above their straight foreheads. As we passed by they looked at us frankly and unashamedly, chattering together, especially the younger ones, with such excitement that I began to think they had never seen a European before.

The house before which we eventually halted was similar to the others, only somewhat larger, and washed over with a pale-yellow colour so that it stood out from among the rest. A small black boy stood in the open doorway, keeping guard. Motioning M'bopa back, my escort bowed low before me with outspread hands in the Mohammedan fashion, and ushered me through the doorway. Feeling in a sort of dream, I stepped inside.

A most amazing sight met my eyes. Used as I was to the dismal huts of the negroes in the depths of the forest, with their dank, steamy walls, filthy floors, and indescribably disgusting smells, the room that confronted me was astounding. I rubbed my eyes hard, and even pinched my arm, to make sure that I was awake. Never before had I come across such civilization in the heart of the African jungle.

There were no windows in the room—which must have measured at least twelve feet square—but rush-

lights and flax tapers flickered from the walls and lit up the mats and woven carpets that were strewn over the floor. At one end a fire burned brightly, the smoke finding its outlet in a small hole half-way up the wall, and over the glowing embers a black man was crouched, the flames lighting his ebony skin to a copper-coloured satin. A delicious smell of roasting coffee-beans filled the air.

I must have stayed quite four minutes, taking in all the sights in the amazing room, before I became conscious that a number of men were squatting on the floor before the fire, their robes spread round them, smoking long clay pipes from which the smoke blew upwards in little grey puffs. All without exception had beards, black or tinged with grey, and they nodded slowly to themselves as they smoked, or spoke a few words to each other in a low, sing-song intonation. At length one of them, an old man with a grizzled beard, set down the earthenware cup he was holding, and lifted his hand.

" You are welcome, stranger," he said, in the same tongue which I had heard before. " Coffee is being prepared to refresh you after your long journey. Perhaps you will do us the honour of drinking it in our company ? "

His words amazed me. I knew by experience and repute, the proverbial hospitality of the Arabs, how they vied with each other to do honour to a stranger, and set out their choicest delicacies to tempt his appetite. But to accept my presence here in the forest as a common occurrence, to treat me as though I were a casual passer-by who had dropped in to the village for a brief visit, these were happenings for which I was totally unprepared. I was not going

to quarrel with them, however. I thanked the man gratefully for his hospitality, and squatted down on the mat he indicated at his side. He offered me a pipe.

Meanwhile the slave—if slave he was—had finished roasting the coffee beans and begun to pound them together between two flat slabs of stone. When he had done so, he poured boiling water over the powder, and the most delicious smell rose to my nostrils, a smell which I had not known since leaving Marseilles many months ago. Little flat, thin cakes were laid before me, and a dish of wheat and rice cooked in butter. I began to eat and drink, the men around me continuing to replenish their bowls with coffee, in order to keep me company and prevent me from feeling embarrassed.

It was not until I had finished the little meal, and the slave had brought round a dish of scented water in which I was expected to wash my hands and face, that my host at length dismissed the men seated round him, leaned forward a little towards me, and began to question me. Beneath his courteous affability, beneath his suave and friendly manner as of two old acquaintances chatting amicably together, I sensed that there lurked a man of power and action, a man accustomed to having his least order obeyed without question, who would not hesitate to remove me from his path if I hindered him from the achievement of his purpose; and I decided it would be best if I told him the story of my adventures as openly and plainly as possible.

He made no comment while I recounted my acquisition of the Dried Head, only he seemed a little mystified at my description of the circus,

and then nodded his head gravely several times when I told him exactly what the word implied. His eyes strayed once or twice to the Dried Head still hanging at my waist, but for the most part he kept them fixed on my face, his lips moving in time to my words.

I told him how ' Jim ' and I had been captured on the bank of the Lualaba River by the cannibals, as we were making a portage over the falls, and how my poor companion had been brutally murdered to provide a feast for the tribe. I described my sudden and unexpected salvation, brought about by the discovery of the Dried Head among my belongings, how the tribe had greeted its appearance with mingled reverence and horror—owing to the fact, of which I was ignorant at the time, that it bore the dreaded curse of the cannibals—and how the Witch Doctor had renewed the curse over my head and banished me from the tribe for having brought back the evil thing to the village. I explained too, how, when I was nearly at the point of starvation in the forest, M'bopa had appeared, banished also for having found the Head in my canoe, and how he had remained with me as my servant.

" And when he told me of the strange lost tribe in the jungle, and the village of stone houses on the edge of the grassland, deserted by everyone but two old people," I continued, " my curiosity became too much for me. I decided to search, first for the village —which I found—and then for the unknown tribe. And here I am."

For a while there was silence in the room. The tapers flickered as the flax fibres burned down to the bowls in which they were placed, sending long shadows

over the grey ceiling. Smoke from our pipes filled the air. Curiosity consumed me. I longed to ask the man at my side what tribe he belonged to; if it was indeed his people who had left the village on the edge of the forest; and if so, why they had left the two old people to die in their empty hut, without food or water. Yet something in his stern countenance stayed my questions. I waited for him to speak.

At last he took the long clay pipe from his mouth and began.

"It is an interesting tale you have told me, my son," he said, speaking in the slow, sing-song tone that characterizes most Semitic languages, ' and I believe it is the truth that you have uttered. But now that you have reached the end of your search, what is it you want with us? We are here, living in the forest; we hunt, we keep a few cattle, and a handful of goats whose wool we use to make mats and blankets; we till the ground and grow corn and vegetables. But there is no mystery about us, as you can see, my son."

I could contain myself no longer. His words, kindly and reasonably uttered, had told me precisely nothing of what I wanted to know. Not one of my questions had been answered.

"But how did you get here?" suddenly I burst out. "Why are you living in the forest with your goats and cattle and your brick houses? And why did you leave your village in the south,"—I looked down at the wizened head in my belt—" with the two old people in it? Have the negroes never troubled you, or made war upon you? Do you take them as slaves when it pleases you to do so?"

At my flood of questions a scarcely discernible frown, as faint as the shadow of a breath of wind puckering the calm surface of the sea, for a second darkened his features. But when he spoke it was with the same serene tranquillity he had shown towards me before.

" I see that you are gifted with a great curiosity, my son," he said, " and curiosity, you know, is not always the best of qualities. Nevertheless, I will do my utmost to gratify it as well as I can.

" Long years ago the fathers of my fathers came down from the desert to capture black men to sell as slaves in the market-places of Darfur and Wadai. Three times a year they came—in spring, in summer and in autumn—the caravans moving in a long trail over the sandy wastes, with camels and mules gaily caparisoned in bells and silken tassels, and horses ridden by members of the tribe. When they reached the fringe of the dark forests they halted and set up their tents, while the bravest of them went off into the depths of the jungle to steal slaves and ivory and other merchandise. Twenty days passed, and then the warriors returned with their trophies—elephants' tusks and ebony, and usually a chain of negro slaves. They feasted long into the night, and gave thanks to Allah who had rewarded their efforts so well. The next day they set off along the trail to Darfur, where they disposed of their merchandise for much red gold.

" But there was one man whose heart sank when he saw the piteous faces of the blacks, and heard the wailing of their abandoned children. He refused to be a party to such inhuman traffic, spoke to some of his comrades, and they agreed with him. Dis-

satisfied, no longer happy with their own kind, they took their wives and children and set off alone across the desert, their few belongings—blankets and cooking-pots and earthenware bowls—loaded on to a number of hardy mules. A few goats dragged unwillingly along in the rear. Afraid of possible pursuit, when they reached the entrance to the forest the little band of travellers did not halt but went inside, into the damp, sunless depths of the jungle, and stumbled on for many weary weeks, some of the women falling by the wayside, the mules dying one by one, until at length they came to this clearing. It seemed an answer to their despairing prayers—at last Allah had been good to them—a place where they could live as they wished. They dropped their baggage, tethered the goats that still remained, and set about building themselves shelters against the rain and sun. So they grew and flourished in their little forest settlement for generation after generation, undisturbed, peaceful, contented. . . ."

His voice died away, and for a little time there was silence between us, as I tried to picture the scene conjured up before me: the little band of emigrants setting off across the yellow wastes of the Sahara; the long struggle through the forest, dragging the weary animals; and then the sudden sight of the clearing, with its soft carpet of turf and its shelter of giant trees. Suddenly I thought of something.

"But the deserted village in the south, the village in the grassland—what was that? Where does that come into the story?"

He puffed at his pipe in silence for a minute.

"Slowly, my son, slowly," he said, in that soft, soothing voice of his, "or you will reach the end of

the journey before I have turned the first corner. Many years ago, then, when my grandfather was leader of the tribe and headman of the village, a number of his subjects grew discontented with their lot and set off one day into the forest, southwards, to build a new village. With the sun shining on their left hands before noon, and on their right hands after, they journeyed on, until they came to the edge of the grassland. There, after a further march, they rested and built their houses. A new village was established."

"And the two old people . . . ?"

Once again the suspicion of a frown flitted over the serene features, and I caught a watchful expression in the gleaming depths of the dark eyes.

"They were diseased," he answered. "They became lepers. Their fellows left them and returned to us again."

The callousness of it horrified me.

"But they would have starved to death if the natives had not chanced upon them and fed them," I protested.

His eyes shut tightly. Slowly, methodically, he puffed at his pipe.

"What good are lepers in the world?" he asked, answering my protest with another. "They are better dead. The remainder of the deserters returned to us, fearful of catching the dreaded disease if they were to remain, but—we killed them. We have no use for weaklings here."

Another silence fell. I puffed at my pipe, only to find that it had gone out. I seemed to have forgotten all the questions that I wanted to ask. There was a strange unreal atmosphere about the darkening

room, with its guttering tapers and dead fire, and suddenly I longed to be out in the forest again, hemmed in by no man-made walls, listening to the wind in the trees and the monotonous, refreshing patter of rain through the tangled foliage. I rose and stood looking down doubtfully at the old man at my feet.

Carefully he laid down his pipe and stood up also.

" Perhaps you will stay with us a little while, my son," he murmured, " you and your black servant. He will be well cared for. We have many black servants here—slaves, if you will, but they come of their own free will in exchange for the many presents we give to their tribes—and I think they are happy. As for you, my son, you will be treated as an honoured guest. All the resources of the village shall be placed at your disposal. You shall have a room in my own house. And for that Thing which you wear at your belt : though it was once the head of one of my countrymen, it does not fill me with horror. The curses of Witch Doctors, if they be cannibals or no, cannot hurt a loyal child of Allah ; and yet," and the ghost of a smile wrinkled the corners of his eyes, " perhaps it would be well if you destroyed it—just in case of an accident ! Well, will you decide to stay with us for a little while, my son ? "

What was I to do ? It would have been discourteous to refuse such an hospitable, politely-worded invitation, and now that I had found the lost tribe for whom I had been seeking, there was no reason to be gone ; yet a vague premonition disturbed me, somehow urged me to leave the village as soon as possible. Such a feeling was new to me, and I shook it off impatiently. Why should the

friendly words of an old Arab chieftain fill me with an obscure, intangible dread? Why did I feel a sudden longing to be back again in the freedom of the jungle, under no man's authority but my own? The long journey through the forest, and the excitement at reaching the goal, must have affected me more than I thought.

I bowed low, my hands extended palms downwards, Arab fashion, my feet together.

"I shall be pleased to accept your hospitality," I replied, "and stay in your village for a few days. It will be pleasant to sleep beneath a roof again."

So it was arranged, and that night, when darkness fell, as it does in the tropics, with the suddenness of a blanket dropped all at once from the sky, I slept in an upper room, a blanket rolled warmly around me, and a number of woven mats piled together to form a couch. M'bopa, in true servant fashion, lay across the open doorway, determined to guard me from the strange, white-robed people whom, although they called themselves my friends, he distrusted wholeheartedly. For were they not of the tribe of the Dried Head, and did they not bear the curse of the cannibals, the curse which brought death?

As for the Head itself, it hung on the wall above my couch. For some reason beyond my comprehension, I could not bring myself to destroy it, despite the words of the Arab. He, although a true follower of Islam and therefore contemptuous of native superstition, had nevertheless advised its destruction 'in case of an accident.' I, refusing to compromise, sentimentally inclined to keep the relic for the sake of 'Jim' and Sebah, had spurned his advice. Had I been able to look into the future,

and had seen the tragedies which were, unaccountably, to be linked up with that little piece of withered skin and bone ; had I known that the curse of the cannibals would be fulfilled not only once but three times ; I should have cast it into the fire without a further second's thought.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

CHILYA

I SOON discovered that the Sheikh's house was far superior to the rest of the buildings in the village. The others formed a ramshackle, tumble-down collection, for earth bricks have a habit of crumbling after a time when the sun shines down upon them pitilessly all day, leaving a number of cracks in which tufts of grass soon begin to sprout. Later, I found that the Arabs built their houses from earth dug after one of the periodic rainstorms, when it was wet and workable. It was then formed into rough bricks—the masons being not too particular as to the regularity of their shape—which were joined together by liquid mud instead of cement. The whole was plastered over with more of the mud to fill up any cracks. Often several houses were joined together with the plaster, to give them support.

Inside, the conditions were much better than those found in the interior of negro huts, in which only the most insensitive of visitors can bear to remain for more than a minute, and to M'bopa each was a veritable palace, after the hovels of woven branches to which he was accustomed; but still it was obvious to me that the Arabs did not believe that cleanliness came next to godliness in the hierarchy

of virtues. Their little houses stank appallingly to my nostrils—hardened though I was to the smell of rotten vegetation and decaying flesh that was a continual accompaniment to forest travel. Dirty bones, discarded vegetable stalks, torn rags of clothing, cluttered the floors and often oozed out into the pathways in front. Smoke from the fires and the eternally puffing pipes filled the air and hung like a grey veil from the dusty ceiling. While, after eating, having finished tearing the meat to pieces with their fingers, the Arabs thought nothing of throwing away unwanted pieces of gristle on to the floor, or calmly spitting across the room as they sat together drinking coffee.

I soon settled down to the strangely simple life of the Arab tribe. It was a placid, uneventful existence. The same things were done day after day, and I soon discovered that it was the women who did most of the work. When they were not out in the fields, weeding the silver barley, milking the long-haired goats, or tending to the plantations of tobacco or coffee, or looking after their numerous brown-skinned offspring, who ran naked in and out of the houses all day long, they would sit in front of their doorways, grinding corn or weaving mats and blankets of goats' wool. The men, on the other hand, spent most of their time drinking sweet, syrupy coffee out of their little earthenware bowls, and gossiping together; although occasionally they bestirred themselves to make clay bowls and dishes on an old-fashioned potter's wheel, or worked goatskins and antelope hides into saddles and water-buckets.

Looking back over those months spent in the

village of the lost tribe, I realize now that had it not been for one thing I should soon have said farewell to the Sheikh and his subjects and set off into the forest again with M'bopa. The half-civilized and half-primitive life was irksome to me. Treated like a guest, I was not allowed to do any work, and the sameness, the monotony, so different from my eventful existence of the past months, would soon have begun to prey on my nerves. But, strangely enough, I scarcely noticed how the days passed in unchanging succession, for an adventure upon which I stumbled almost by accident altered my whole existence on the very first morning after my arrival in the village.

It was barely dawn, but even at that early hour I was wide awake. It was, after all, the time when I had been used to set off on the day's march, and the habit of awakening was still strong. Also the novelty of having a roof over my head, and the lack of air—for the Arabs made a point of stuffing up their windows with straw, old blankets and anything else they could lay their hands on at night-time—were not conducive to slumber. So when a low chanting began, telling me that the more devout of the tribesmen were praying and prostrating at the prescribed hour of sunrise, I decided to leave the airless room and wander out into the village.

I had left the rows of houses behind me, and was strolling towards the silver barley fields when a sound of sobbing fell upon my ears. It was an unusual sound to be heard in the heart of the Dark Continent, for native girls are early made to realize that tears are despised by their elders and looked upon as a sign of weakness. Many children, in fact,

never learn to cry at all. I walked quietly forward, and peered through the branches of a low bush of acacia that flanked the pathway.

On the earth, covered in a rust-red robe that swathed her from head to toe, a black cloth veiling her hair, lay a girl, her face to the ground and her arms stretched out before her in complete abandonment to her grief. She was not so much sobbing as moaning—little moans of mingled desperation and anger—and from time to time her slender brown fingers clutched viciously at the turf on which she lay.

I took a tentative step towards her, and a dry branch crackled loudly beneath my foot.

Immediately she started round, and at sight of me drew the dark veil over her face, so that I could see only her eyes, curious and not at all frightened, above the length of black stuff. She stared at me unabashedly, seeming to forget all at once that she was supposed to be weeping; and I, in my turn, gazed back at her, at the dark, silky hair straying from beneath its covering, at the black, almond-shaped eyes darkened with some sort of powder until they shone as lustrously as two black pearls; at the smooth, pale-brown skin and the long tapering fingers stained red at the tips with henna. Even in the shapeless red cloak and shrouding veil which now covered all the lower part of her face, I knew that she was the loveliest girl I had ever seen.

There was a moment of silence while we stared at each other, and then she spoke. Her voice was low and muffled in the folds of the veil, yet somehow brittle and imperious, as though she were accustomed to getting her own way and had now—for the

first time in her life—struck opposition to her wishes.

"So you are the Christian?" she said. "I heard that you were come." Her eyes softened suddenly, and I felt that her mouth was smiling beneath the veil. "I think I like Christians."

I could think of nothing to say except: "Why were you crying?"

Immediately she grew sad again, obviously capable of changing her moods with the speed and suddenness of a tropical storm. Her kohl-darkened eyes looked at me sorrowfully. She hung her head.

"It is my father," she answered. "He has promised me in marriage to Abu Kajah, and he is old and fat and—and I do not like him. The other women—they are dogs, they do what they are bid and are thankful for the husbands their fathers give them; but I am the Sheikh's daughter," she drew herself up proudly, "and I will not wed the man I do not want."

"Then why do you cry?" I persisted.

"I am the daughter of a sheikh," she reiterated. "And, being such, how much more am I bound to obey the word of my father, than those sows of women who have no wills of their own and say 'Yes, my lord' and 'No, my lord' all day long? Yet," wistfully, "Abu Kajah is old and fat, and I hate him!" Suddenly she rose from the ground and moved over to me, with that peculiarly graceful, sinuous gait that all Arab women possess, whether they happen to be the daughters of sheikhs or of peasants. She looked up confidingly into my face and her long lashes flickered against her cheek. She was amazingly attractive.

" Perhaps you will help me, Christian," she said, naïvely. " You are a stranger, and a powerful one. You carry a mighty talisman in your belt,"—looking down at the Dried Head which, almost subconsciously, I had taken from the wall and slung upon my waistband. " If you were to persuade my father that you—that you desired me above Abu Kajah's desire, he might perhaps relent and change his mind. And if you won't, I still shall not go to Kajah. Hidden beneath the earth in a corner of my hut is a dagger whose blade I sharpen every day upon a stone." Suddenly she grew beseeching. " Christian, how much nicer am I alive than dead ? Perhaps we could be friendly, could we not ? I am the Sheikh's daughter and have many privileges. Will you not help me ? "

It seemed to me all at once as I stood there, listening to the soft, pleading words of the beautiful girl before me, that I had stepped straight into, and become a part of, a story from the *Arabian Nights*. It was all there : the secret, mysterious village in the depths of the forest, the Sheikh and his beautiful daughter, the cruel suitor to whom she was betrothed, the sharpened dagger held in readiness ; and I, presumably, was the prince in disguise who had come to rescue her.

I looked at her again, and knew that she, at least, was no fairy-tale princess, but a living woman, the most exquisite woman I had ever set eyes on. I pictured to myself the fat old suitor, Abu Kajah, who sat, I imagined, drinking coffee and spitting on the floor all day long, a hideous, disgusting old toad who was expecting to be given this enchanting girl as his wife, to revolt with his maudlin, middle-aged

affection. Still she looked at me, her eyes beseeching, and for a minute, as she turned her head, the veil dragged down and revealed a brown cheek, faintly flushed with rose over the high, Moorish cheek-bone, and bright red lips parted over tiny white teeth.

Such a glimpse of hidden beauties was enough to convince me that there was nothing I wanted more in the world than to play Prince Charming to such a damsel in distress. Perhaps it was because I was still young and impressionable—only half-way through my twenties—and had not seen a single woman, white or black, for many months; but nevertheless, although I was perfectly aware that the girl was merely using me for her own ends, conscious of her ability to charm me to her purpose, whatever it might be, I knew that I should have to do all I could to help her.

"Well," I said, "I will do what I can for you, but you must not expect me to go to the Sheikh at once. I have not been in the village twenty-four hours yet, and I am only a stranger. Still, I will do what I can." Then, as she seemed satisfied with my words, and smiled at me with her lovely eyes: "You know," I could not help adding, "you are very beautiful."

She nodded her head solemnly, like a child agreeing with an adult, anxious to show its grown-up intelligence.

"Yes, I know," she replied. "Many men have desired me, but my father chose Abu Kajah, because he is rich, with many goats and daughters, and a hoard of gold hidden somewhere where only he can find it. He has paid much for me, much more than he would pay for another woman, and I—I will not

go to him, not if my father forces me at the point of his sword."

I ought, I suppose, to have been annoyed at the girl's conceit, but she spoke so ingenuously, like a child, that it did not seem like conceit, but rather like a plain statement of fact. And certainly she was beautiful; that fact could not be disputed. Her loveliness was plain to see, even beneath the thick folds of the red robe and the black, voluminous veil. I realized suddenly, as I prepared to leave her and return to the house of my host, that life in the village promised to be quite exciting after all.

After a few weeks in the village I discovered that the tribesmen were not particularly strict Muslims, although usually they observed the five times of prayer, prostrating themselves north-eastwards towards Mecca, and that they had, in their isolation in the depths of the forest, instituted various customs which were neither Arabian nor Egyptian, but seemed to have been evolved by their own efforts.

The young unmarried girls, for instance, like the one I had encountered at dawn, usually wore black veils across their heads, which they were expected to draw over their face when speaking to a man, but as soon as they became wives they were allowed to throw off the cumbersome, shroud-like garment and show their faces and shining black hair to the rest of the community. Thus the black veil became a sign of virginity.

Harems were not common. Some rich men, who could afford to buy a number of wives with their crops or cattle, had three or four to wait upon them, but the usual practice was for a man to have one wife until she was past childbearing, when he would

be allowed to take a younger woman who would bear further sons to him. It was a cruel practice, for the younger wife invariably suffered agonies from the elder's jealousy, and must also frequently have been disgusted by the love-making of her fat and elderly husband.

Yet they seemed happy enough with their lot, and never appeared to rebel against it. Like the negroes, they lived from day to day, from dawn until sunset, and rarely made complaints or remembered the unhappiness of the evening before. "*Mektub;* it is written," they said. "It is as Allah wills."

Only Chilya was different. She was the girl whom I had discovered weeping in the fields, the daughter of the Sheikh, and she seemed to have more life than the rest of the womenfolk put together. Where they remained placid and bovine, with spirits so tamed by centuries of submission that they had little individuality left, she was alert and intelligent, conscious of her duties as the daughter of the chieftain, and yet conscious also that she had but one life to live and must make it as full as possible. Her eyes sparkled with mischief. Her slender, henna-stained fingers fluttered among the threads as she sat at her weaving, as though longing to escape. Her feet danced along the fields instead of carrying her slowly and sedately. Her veil blew too frequently from her face and revealed its dusky charms. She was incredibly beautiful.

After our encounter in the fields, and her plea to me to save her from marriage with the old man she despised, she seemed to regard me as her especial friend and protector. She took to following me around like a dog, quite unashamed of such an open

display of affection, regardless of the fact that she still wore the black veil of maidenhood and was therefore supposed to keep herself aloof from all male society. As soon as she had finished the work allotted to her—not so much as that of her fellows, because she was the Chief's daughter and privileged to rest and enjoy herself—at her loom, or in the barley fields, she would come running to find me, her little feet in their open-toed sandals pattering gaily along the trodden paths, the gold chains round her neck clinking, her soft voice calling: "Christian! Christian!" Sometimes, when the sun was hot in the village and beating down mercilessly, she would throw off the long red robe which she invariably wore and stand before me in her veil and a long, almost transparent garment, like an old-fashioned shift, which revealed the straight, slender lines of her body, and I would wonder anew at the amazing perfection of her beauty.

Increasingly, as I got to know her better, I began to dislike the thought of Chilya, so young and exquisite and full of life, married to a man old enough to have begotten her himself. How she would droop, like a wilting flower, I thought, when he had tamed her youthful wildness to a frightened submission. How she would hate to take her place among the rest of the married women, grinding corn and milking the goats, and weaving the interminable mats and blankets. Her place was out in the woods and green pastures, picking hibiscus blossoms to stick behind her ears, or chasing the monster butterflies that flashed jewelled wings in the sunlight.

Her moods were as changeable as a child's. Sometimes, in a soft, wistful voice, her eyes brimming with

unshed tears that turned them to two black, bottomless pools, she would remind me of the fate that was rapidly approaching her, and beg me to do something to save her from it.

" In a little month, Christian," she would whisper, " in one little month I shall have to go to him, and I prefer to die, to kill myself, than that that should happen. I hate him—and I will not be his wife." Then, gently and tearfully, her almond-shaped eyes eloquent of her despair, her slender fingers clasped in an attitude of prayer : " Won't you help me, Christian ? Won't you plead with my father to save me from Abu Kajah ? "

At other times she would draw herself up, her eyes would flash fire, and she would pour the whole force of her scorn upon me, lashing me with her words and trying to whip me into compliance with her wishes by the very magnitude of her contempt.

" You are a man," she would cry, " a white man, powerful and wise, and will not help me ! Had you never come to the village, I would have been the better pleased ! Perhaps you are afraid that my father will strike you with the palm of his hand, or pull your beard, or spit upon you ? Or do you fear that Abu Kajah will steal to your bed one night with a dagger bright between his teeth ? Oh, you need have no fear," contemptuously, " he is old and fat, and craves me only because I am the Sheikh's daughter—and beautiful. Were my father to forbid the marriage, Kajah would accept his word. He would rather lose me than give himself any trouble ; but my father will not listen to my pleas. He says that Kajah will make me a good husband, and that I should be proud to bring so much gold to my house. But he is so

Sudan Railways

TYPICAL SUDANESE ARABS

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'THEY TOOK THEIR WIVES AND CHILDREN AND SET OFF ACROSS THE DESERT'

AN ARAB FAMILY MOVES HOUSE

Sudan Railways

ARAB TRIBESMAN FROM THE LOWER SUDAN

Sudan Railways

ARABIAN BEAUTIES FROM THE SUDAN

old and fat and lazy ; and you are young, Christian, and strong. Oh, how I hate you ! " And she would stamp her little foot until the jewels pressed between her toes sparkled and shone, and shake her head so that the veil slipped back from her enchanting face.

Soft and wistful, she was lovely, a charming child ready to burst into tears because nobody loved her, pleading gently for a little happiness out of life ; but when her eyes flashed fire, and she stamped her foot and swore at me, she became a woman, alive, beautiful, desirable ; and I knew quite definitely that before long I should be hopelessly in love with her.

Her father, the Sheikh, remained my courteous, friendly host. I continued to sleep in the upper room of his house, with M'bopa stretched across the doorway, sat smoking with him until nightfall, and took my frugal meals with him. The Arabs rarely ate more than once a day, at supper, although they continually drank their little bowls of sweet coffee, and the food was of the simplest. Wheat and barley, crudely ground and cooked with a lot of butter, or thin baked cakes spread with cream cheese, constituted the main part of the meal. Stews, thick and peppery, with a little goat's meat or perhaps the flesh from a trapped antelope as the foundation, liberally augmented with cooked vegetables, peas, beans, and sweet manioc, were also much enjoyed. Despising knives and forks, the Arabs dipped their fingers into the pot to fish out the choicest morsels of meat. Bananas and juicy berries followed. With the food palm-wine was drunk—another sign that the tribe were not strict followers of Islam—which the men obtained by tapping the palm trees much in

the same way that rubber is collected. Afterwards came the inevitable bowl of coffee, and the long session of ' smoke-drinking,' with long clay pipe or bubbling *nargileh*, until nightfall called the drinkers to bed.

During these evening confabulations about a dozen of the most important villagers came in to the Sheikh's house, squatting round on cushions while his black servant ground and roasted coffee for them, and handed round their pipes. Usually the Sheikh talked to them, while they grunted reply, about affairs in the village, the increase in the number of goats and the welfare of the crops, or made arrangements for a hunting expedition on the morrow. Sometimes the next visit west was due : for about twice a year, so I was told, a band of men journeyed up to the Congo, where they were usually fortunate in encountering traders with whom they could exchange goods. They took with them the things they had been making—leather sandals, saddles, blankets, mats and clay pots—and in exchange brought down tools, lengths of cotton stuff for robes, rings and trinkets, and ocasionally, if they were lucky, packets of tea and tobacco. It was always a time of great rejoicing when the traders returned. For once the women showed a little excitement, clustering round the men and looking wide-eyed at their treasures, arguing who should have the brightest pieces of cloth, until the men strode brusquely up to them, pushed them aside, and carried away the goods to share out in their own way among the different families.

I was present at the nightly meetings in the Sheikh's house, but rarely took any part in them.

I soon discovered that the man was abnormally strict and severe, very just in his dealings with others, but also arrogant and autocratic; and, thinking of Chilya, and my promise to speak to her father about the forthcoming marriage, I wondered how best I might win the Sheikh to my way. Seeing Abu Kajah, for he came nightly to the hut, I could understand Chilya's reluctance to marry him. He was old and fat, with a greasy jowl that hung down like a bloodhound's, and his little eyes shifted uneasily hither and thither, as though he were expecting unseen enemies to pounce down from the ceiling and assassinate him. I imagined Chilya in his arms, like a firefly in the clammy grip of a toad, and I shuddered, thinking how her bright wings would be bruised, how she would pine for freedom, and instead be doomed to everlasting drudgery, submitting to his hated embraces, unwillingly bearing his children, until her sparkling youth was gone and her spirit numbed and dead.

She came to occupy my thoughts more and more. Her changing moods tantalized and fascinated me. Her trust in me, her belief in my ability to save her from the approaching marriage, flattered me so that I desired above all things to become her protector. Her beauty dazzled my eyes. At length I made up my mind that before another night had passed I would take my courage in both hands and dare the anger of the Sheikh.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

A FOREST IDYLL

WHEN I walked through the open doorway of the Sheikh's house that evening, earlier than usual in order to find him alone, I discovered him sitting in the accustomed manner cross-legged upon the floor, inhaling smoke through a long hookah, his blanket draped round him in regal folds, a red, tasselled tarboosh on his head. He seemed to be staring into space, his eyes lifted a little, one hand absently stroking his bearded chin. A gold ring on his finger glinted dully in the smoke-laden atmosphere.

I stood before him a moment, and he did not even acknowledge my presence. The hookah bubbled, slowly and gutturally, and the smoke rose in a long blue spiral. I felt acutely embarrassed.

" Well, my son ? "

He spoke quietly, almost as though talking to himself, and never removed his eyes from the spot on the wall on which they were fixed. I shifted my weight uneasily on to the other foot. How was I to begin ? He was not making it any easier for me by his studied indifference to my presence in the room.

" It is about your daughter," I burst out.

The black eyebrows were raised for an instant,

and the gleaming eyes directed for a minute on to my face, then once again he resumed his contemplation of the cracks on the opposite wall.

" My daughter ? "

" She is unhappy," I plunged. " She hates Abu Kajah because he is fat and ugly and middle-aged. She says she will not marry him, but will rather kill herself first. There is a dagger . . ."

The soft voice interrupted. It was friendly—almost too friendly—and yet behind its friendliness I could discern a firm and inflexible purpose. Once his mind was made up, I felt, nothing would alter it, neither the pleadings of his beautiful daughter nor the threats of another man. He was the ruler of the tribe, powerful and autocratic, and he knew it.

" You do not understand, my son," he murmured. " It is not a question of happiness or unhappiness. It is duty. Chilya must marry whom I choose, and I have chosen Abu Kajah, who has much property and riches, and will help to fill the coffers of my house. There is no more to be said."

" But he is so old," I persisted, " and Chilya is young and alive. It is cruel to make her marry someone she does not love."

The old man smiled, a sort of pitying smile which parted his lips but did not reach his eyes. He put his mouth to the pipe and puffed quickly, so that the water in the bowl bubbled furiously and gusts of smoke puffed upward like little wads of thin cotton-wool. At last he removed his lips and spoke.

" What is love ? " he said, softly.

There was so obviously no answer to this question that I remained silent, waiting for him to speak again. At the far end of the room, by the fire, the black

slave suddenly appeared and began roasting coffee berries. The smell of them filled the air.

"You do not understand, my son," the Sheikh reiterated. "Here we do not have the same ideas as you white men in your own cold lands. A woman's duty is always to obey, first her father and then her husband. There is no love, or even inclination, for her. She is her father's property, to be sold to the man who offers most. It is the law."

"I know, I know," I answered. "But Chilya is different. She is gay and alive, not like these placid women who accept the husbands given to them without a murmur of protest. She is beautiful, and Abu Kajah must not marry her."

He raised his eyes at my outburst, and looked me straight in the face.

"Do you want to marry her yourself, then, my son?" he asked.

Up till then the thought of marriage with Chilya had not entered my mind. I had thought of her always as something lovely and unattainable, a fair sprite with moods as varied as the winds, whom I had been privileged to know for a little. That I might perhaps make her my wife had never occurred to me. I was, after all, merely a traveller through the forest, with no intention of staying there or making it my permanent home. But the Sheikh's words gave wings to my imagination, conjured up a vision of what the future might, astonishingly enough, hold for me. To have Chilya for my wife, that lovely, untamed forest maiden, with her clinging arms and her proud, imperious head; to spend the rest of my life in the freedom and seclusion of the forest, a lover and follower of Nature:

what more could a man desire, a man, moreover, who hated the world of civilization with its trivial, petty quarrels, its meannesses, its wars and hatreds and compromises ?

I took a deep breath.

" Yes, I want Chilya for my wife," I said, and took a step backward, almost expecting the Sheikh to spring up and flourish a dagger at my head for my audacity.

He did not move, however, but appeared to be thinking deeply. His chin was sunk on to his hand and his eyes were closed. The pipe had slipped from his fingers and gone out. Away across the room the slave was pounding the roasted berries to powder. Faintly through the uncurtained doorway came the cry of a bird in the woods.

The Sheikh raised his head.

" I have always wanted a white man for a son-in-law," he murmured softly, as though to himself, " for white men are strong and wise and know the ways of the world. That is why I welcomed you so gladly when you came and am pleased to have you here as my honoured guest." He inclined his head courteously. " But my daughter cannot wed a pauper. Her husband must have riches to bequeath to me, much riches, for she is most sought after of all women of the tribe—being my only daughter—and I cannot, for my pride's sake, let her wed a man bringing no purchase-money." Then, with a sigh : " It is a pity you have no riches, my son, for you are tall and straight and young, and Abu Kajah is, in truth, somewhat old and fat."

" Perhaps I could find wealth for you," I answered, suddenly all eagerness to make real the vision which

the Sheikh had conjured up for me. "Enough wealth to buy Chilya and save her from Abu Kajah. Only give me a little time, and I will search for rare animals, skins, perhaps ivory, to make you rich and give Chilya to me. Only postpone the marriage for a few months, and I will do what I can to win her."

At this somewhat melodramatic speech of mine he nodded his head slowly, so that the dark tassel on his tarboosh swayed a little from side to side, and his dusky brow was furrowed in thought. Then suddenly he rose and confronted me.

"Abu Kajah shall wait for six months," he said. "For six months he shall wait to pluck the flower that is my daughter. But if by that time you have convinced me that you will make a better husband for her than he, then you shall take her for your wife instead of him. I have spoken."

He spread his hands and bowed his head in a gesture of dismissal, and then turned towards the fire to accept a bowl of coffee from the ever-ready slave. The interview was over. I swung round and marched out of the hut, feeling as though I had just awakened from a dream, as though I were walking on air. For six months, then, I was free to love my beautiful Chilya, to roam the woods with her, to watch her slim fingers flashing in and out of the loom, to see her throw back her shining black hair so that the sun glinted in its raven tresses. For six months she was reprieved from marriage with the man she hated. And when the six months were up, who knew what might happen? My happiness was such that I was content to leave the matter in the lap of the gods. *Mektub;* it is written; say the Arabs. Let it be as Allah wills.

Outside her father's hut Chilya was waiting for me, the black veil across her face, her eyes mysterious and questioning. By some strange means she had discovered that I was speaking to the Sheikh. Feminine intuition must have told her the reason. And there she was, her arms outstretched to detain me as I left the house, knowing full well that I had some news to impart to her.

"You have seen my father?" she murmured, nestling up against me so that my nostrils were assailed by the strong musky reek of her perfume. "What words did he speak to you, beloved?"

Never before had she addressed me so tenderly, never used an endearment when speaking to me before. Her proximity, the scent of her hair, and her dark, mysterious eyes, full of promises to come, sent wave after wave of thrilling sensation through me. I felt myself trembling at the soft pressure of her fingers on my arm. Still feeling myself in the middle of a dream, and afraid lest I should break it by the slightest movement, I led her over to a shady arbour of trees and told her everything the Sheikh, her father, had said to me.

Her delight was boundless. Immediately she changed from the languorous maiden to the small, excited child—one of those sudden changes of mood which delighted and thrilled me so much. Jumping up from the cushion of soft green moss on which she had been sitting, she threw off the hampering robe and began to dance around me, her slender body swaying like a reed troubled by the wind, her legs long and brown beneath the thin cotton tunic. The black veil tossed like a dark cloud about her face. She was so bewitching, so elf-like as she moved

gracefully over the ground, that I scarcely had the heart to bring her to earth again. Yet I had to tell her that it was only a temporary reprieve.

" Remember," I warned, trying to make my voice sound as solemn and elderly as possible, " remember it is only for six months."

At once she changed from the excited child to the voluptuous woman again. She came over to me and placed her arms around my neck, so that I could feel the soft brown skin of them against my throat. Her voice was gentle, with an insidious tone to it that somehow penetrated my sober common sense —itself completely in shreds—and made me long with all my heart to prolong those six months for ever.

" You are so brave and wise, my beloved," she crooned. " So well versed in the ways of men. You will find a way to convince my father that you are a better man that Abu Kajah, and then—and then——" Looking up, I saw the long lashes of her eyes were brushing her cheek. Shyly she peered under them at my upturned face. " Do you want to wed me, my beloved ? "

I assured her fervently that there was nothing I wanted more on earth. And, indeed, I was quite convinced of it. Never had she appeared so utterly lovely and desirable to me as she did at that moment, her wildness tamed to a gentle, tender acquiescence, her eyes shyly downcast, her whole attitude one of love and surrender. Gently I drew aside her veil, so that I could see the oval, dusky olive face, the red lips, and the down-fluttered lashes.

" I will show you how we white men prove our love," I whispered, and drew her into my arms.

Happy days followed for us. Every morning, as soon as it was light and the Muslims had finished their dawn prayers, I rose from my couch of blankets and mats and went to find Chilya. She did not live with her father, but with his three wives and their young sons in a small hut close by, which served as his harem, and in which no man but the Sheikh was allowed to set his foot. Although she was of noble birth, and had black servants to attend her, she was expected to work as all the women did, and even at that early hour I found her busy at one of her many tasks.

Usually she was sitting at her loom, weaving blankets of goats' wool. The loom was primitive in the extreme, made of two lengths of stick placed upright in the ground with a further piece of stick across them, and a similar structure about two yards away. The wool was stretched horizontally between, so that the whole contraption looked something like a bedstead. The wool was previously spun on a hand distaff. Although the whole system was amazingly simple and uncomplicated, I was astonished at the excellence of the work turned out, at the softness of the blankets and their pleasant colours and patterns.

Other times I would find her grinding corn, crushing the grains to a fine powder with a heavy wooden club for a pestle, her arms moving regularly, her whole body swinging beneath her white tunic to the rhythm of her efforts. With the flour thus made she would delight to cook me *asida*, a sort of pudding kneaded with oil and seasoned with pepper until it was almost too hot to eat, or a dish of *cous-cous*, a food peculiar to the Arabs, made of barley flour

and butter steamed in the oven to a crisp sort of paste, which she would bring to me as I sat in the shade of the trees.

The big meal of the day came in the evening, and for this Chilya would often prepare me dishes, as the Sheikh's wives did for their lord: pigeons, stuffed with herbs and served with beans, pancakes of flour and honey, cheese, pressed dates, mice and small lizards made into a hot, floury stew. The food was simple and not unpleasant, although the Arabs had a habit of smothering most of the dishes with oil and lard—the former obtained from palm trees, the latter from animals—and I was usually able to eat everything that Chilya lovingly placed before me.

After the noon siesta, when the sun's rays began to lose their scorching power, she and I would wander about the fields, or steal into the cool depths of the surrounding forest. Chilya was a never-failing source of wonderment to me. Her quick, unexpected changes of mood, her childish wonder at the tales I told her of my home across the seas, her unending desire to please me and make me happy: all these things delighted me immeasurably. And when she suddenly began to play the woman, clinging and yet elusive, one minute placing her little fingers trustfully in mind, the next darting away from me among the trees with ripples of joyous laughter, her white robe gleaming like a phantom's in the gloom, I wanted nothing more of life but to have her beside me for ever.

Together we would wander among the tracery of lianas, catching rare moths and butterflies, picking dazzling flowers for Chilya to stick in her hair, watching the birds and insects and little green,

darting lizards, and at dusk the fireflies flashing about in the darkness. I spoke to her of my early life, my adventures with the gorillas, the tragic death of ' Jim ' and my lucky escape from the cannibals. I showed her the Dried Head and told her of the curse that was supposed to fall on all who touched it.

" Are you not afraid, beloved, to carry it about at your waist ? " she shuddered. " Have you no fear of the curse ? "

I shook my head.

" Then I am not afraid either, beloved. See, I will touch it." Gingerly she put out a slender finger and traced it over the wrinkled skin. " Am I not brave, beloved ? Are you not proud of me ? " She laughed, as naïvely boastful as a child. " Now, if the curse falls, it will fall on both of us, and we shall die together."

Her delight at such a prospect was so evident that I caught her in my arms in a transport of joy.

A few days after my conversation with the Sheikh, it happened that the band of traders was due to return from the Congo. The village was in a hum of expectation, the women talking more vivaciously than usual as they went about their work, the children chattering together excitedly. Even Chilya, although she tried to appear nonchalant and indifferent, danced round me, her black eyes sparkling above her veil.

" Perhaps there will be a golden bracelet for me," she cried, " or some bright red cotton for a new robe. I would look beautiful for you, beloved."

When the men at length appeared, bearing their loads of treasure, rolls of cloth, packets of tobacco,

tea and rice, plates and dishes and long wooden pipes, I was delighted to see that they had with them a little chimpanzee, only a few months old, which had been given to them by one of the Congo natives.

I went up to the little creature as it squatted on the ground shivering miserably, and spoke to it, making the sounds I had learned from my two chimpanzees of the circus. I stretched out my hand and drew my fingers through the fluffy hair of its back. Then I waited. Soon he responded by little grunts, and by thumping his hands on the ground and bouncing up and down on his hindquarters. The Arabs were so pleased to see this sign of liveliness in the animal that had been so listless and miserable on the journey, that they immediately decided that the chimpanzee should be given to me. I was delighted, and immediately set about training it as a pet for Chilya.

It was an affectionate little creature. Obviously just taken from its mother, it craved to be fondled and made much of, and when I rolled it in a mat for warmth and held it in my arms, it grunted contentedly and blinked at me with its soft brown eyes. We fostered it on to an old nanny-goat, a long-suffering beast who seemed in no way dismayed at her strange fosterling, and soon the chimpanzee had learned to squat beside her and suck as much milk as it wanted. As soon as it had settled down and appeared to be thriving on its new diet, I began to teach it little tricks in order to please Chilya. It soon began to walk on its hind legs with the aid of a tiny stick which I cut down to the right size, and to come when I whistled. I had visions of a day, not so far distant, when I might perhaps teach it to

carry things for its mistress, take her bowls of coffee and dishes of nuts and dates.

In this way the days sped quickly by for me, watching Chilya at her work, roaming with her in the forest, playing with the little ape and watching its intelligence daily increase. I, too, took my part in the affairs of the village. I soon discovered that I had no aptitude for working leather, but at making clay pots and vessels—even without the usual potter's wheel—I grew quite proficient, quickly learning how to dig the clay when it was moist after a rainstorm and how to shape it with my fingers and the ball of my thumb. I took my turn at weeding in the fields—although this was generally reckoned to be a woman's job—and helped in the work of building the roads and earthen walls.

Sometimes I would take M'bopa with me into the forest, and he would climb a tree, his mouth full of tiny pebbles, and bring down small birds and animals which I would collect and present to Chilya as a contribution towards the evening meal—the only really important meal of the day ; or the black man would perform his trick with an arrow and a length of plaited grass and wing the small birds as they flew across. The villagers were astounded at M'bopa's proficiency—as astounded as I had been when he had first showed me the trick in the forest —and often several of them would accompany me to the outskirts of the woods to watch the amazing performance.

The weeks and months slipped by. I was so contented with the easy, placid life of the tribe, so happy in Chilya's gay and loving company, that I hardly noticed the passing of time. Chilya, in her turn,

seemed to forget the future menace of her marriage and lived as light-heartedly as a butterfly. We teased each other gaily about the married life we should lead in the forest and never once mentioned by name Abu Kajah, the villain of the piece. If the thought of him did by chance come into my mind I quickly banished it. I had no wish to disturb Chilya's happiness by reminding her of the man she detested. Happy-go-lucky by nature, I think I must subconsciously have thought that everything would come right in the end, that Chilya was destined for me and nothing could keep her away. At any rate, I steadfastly refused to worry about the matter; selfish and short-sighted of me, no doubt, but nevertheless true.

It was perhaps this calmness, this refusal to accept any other life than the one we were leading, this belief in a kindly Providence watching over our lives, which made future events seem so much more terrible by comparison. It was as though a malignant Fate, grudging us our brief months of happiness, was determined to exact the greatest retribution possible, in the speediest manner.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THE HUNT

ONE evening, as I was sitting cross-legged as usual on a heap of mats in the Sheikh's *kahwah*, sipping coffee from a little earthenware bowl and smoking meditatively, he informed me that a great hunt had been arranged for the morrow, in order to get a store of meat in readiness for the rainy season, when the continual downpour of rain made hunting in the forest impossible.

" Perhaps you would like to take part in it, my son," he said, his shrewd old eyes fixed on mine, his mouth puffing at the bubbling *nargileh*.

At once my heart leapt. Here, ready-made, a seemingly remarkable stroke of Providence, was a way in which perhaps I might prove to the Sheikh my value as a member of the tribe, my right to be considered as a husband for Chilya. If I were to be more successful than any other man on the expedition, if I were to find treasures of gold and ivory for the village, would not the Sheikh consider my suit ?

I broached the matter tentatively, but he turned his eyes away in contemplation of his favourite crack in the wall and pulled gently at his pipe.

" It is as Allah wills," he said—the usual reply of an Arab when he is shy of making a decision—and spoke no more.

I went and told the good news to Chilya. Immediately her lips curved into a delighted smile —she rarely wore her veil now, in my company— and she clapped her hands ecstatically.

"Ah, beloved," she cried, "that is good, is it not? You will go out into the forest and bring back many skins and meats for me. And my father will be pleased with you and give me to you for your wife. Only hurry up, my beloved, for in a few short weeks Abu Kajah will come to claim his bride."

It was the first time for many weeks that Abu Kajah's name had passed Chilya's lips, and when I heard how her voice trembled at the name of the man she hated, I was determined not to let this chance slip by. I would accompany the hunters on their expedition and even kill all the animals in the forest if need be—friends of mine though I had always considered them to be—if by so doing I could save Chilya from her threatened fate and take her for my wife.

About fifty men assembled outside the Sheikh's house at dawn the following morning, long spears and daggers in their hands, their thick blankets folded and held over their left arms to serve as shields, the skirts of their robes tucked above their knees in order not to impede their progress in the tangled forest undergrowth, turbans wound round their heads to protect them from the overhanging branches. There was also a sprinkling of black men, who came to wait upon their masters and hold their weapons.

The position of the blacks in the village was rather a strange one. Although nominally slaves, and expected to do everything their imperious masters commanded, they were really a free people,

'lent' by the chiefs of surrounding negro tribes for a certain period of time, in return for the services done to them by the Arabs. The Semites used to assist with the building of their kraals, show the negroes how to lay out their plantations and give them corn-seed to sow there, and demonstrate the use of the loom and the making of cooking-pots of clay. Sometimes they would make them presents of lengths of cloth, ornaments and tobacco, which the traders had brought down from the Congo. In return the grateful blacks gave them their services as slaves for a year at a time.

M'bopa accompanied me. All this time, while I had been spending more and more of my days in Chilya's company, and had got more and more into the habit of wandering in the forest with her as soon as the work of the day was over, he had maintained an aloof and somewhat disdainful silence, rarely speaking to me or bringing me fruits and other delicacies as he had so often done before. I decided he was jealous of Chilya, who had so obviously usurped his place as my constant companion, and had definite proof of it when I told him of the projected expedition into the forest.

"Will the woman come?" he asked abruptly.

I told him not to be absurd. Women were not in the habit of joining hunting-parties.

At the news his mouth parted in a wide-toothed smile.

"That is good, Master," he grunted.

Poor M'bopa, his hopes of being alone in my company were doomed from the beginning to disappointment! We had scarcely gone an hour's journey hrough the gloomy forest, marching in single file

along one of the beaten paths, our ears attuned for any sound that might betoken the presence of a lurking animal, when there came from behind us the noise of trampled vegetation and the cry of a disturbed and startled monkey. I was walking with M'bopa almost at the head of the line. Looking round, I saw a small, white-trousered figure burst through the tangled undergrowth and run towards me. It was Chilya!

She ran up to me and, regardless of the rest of the huntsmen, who had stopped in their tracks and were looking round in amazement at the sudden apparition who had caused the disturbance, flung her arms joyfully round my neck. M'bopa looked on disapprovingly.

"Did you think I would let you go all alone, then, O my beloved," she murmured, "through all the dangers of the forest? How noble a Sheikh's daughter should I have been, if I had deserted my lover and stayed behind in the safety of the village?"

"But you cannot come with us," I protested, holding her by her two brown little hands at arm's-length and looking into her excited little face. "We shall be in the forest for days, in its very profoundest depths, perhaps without food, perhaps without fire, for all we know; and how could you come too, with briars tearing your legs and branches catching cruelly at your hair? Go back to the village, Chilya, and wait for me there, with the other women. I will return to you as soon as I can."

She stamped her little, sandal-shod foot. Never had she seemed so beautiful to me as she did at that moment, in her thin cotton trousers—which she had

put on presumably to give herself freedom of movement in the jungle—and a bright red waistcoat edged with gold coins that jangled as she moved. Wrapped round her left arm, in imitation of the Arab huntsmen, was a folded blanket. A dagger was stuck in her sash. Her eyes flashed fire.

" My place is here," she shouted, " by your side ! If those other cows of women were not too frightened and lazy, they would come also. I will not go back ! Will not ! Will not ! Do you hear ? And no one shall make me."

A suave voice sounded in my ear. Abu Kajah had detached himself from the line of huntsmen and waddled over to Chilya and me. His little eyes blinked, and one fat, mottled hand fiddled with the tassel to his girdle.

" You are right, Christian," he said, his voice fat and oily as butter. " She cannot come with us. By your leave, Christian," and he made a low, mocking bow, " by your leave, I will take Chilya back to the village, where she will be safe." His eyes glinted. " I cannot have my betrothed exposed to any danger," he said.

At the appearance of Abu Kajah all Chilya's fiery temper, all her imperious assurance vanished like a hooded candle, leaving her trembling and terrified. A look of pleading took the place of the anger that had flashed there a minute before. She clutched my arm.

" Beloved," she whispered. " You will not let him take me away ? I could not—I could not bear to leave you. Do not let him do so."

At once my mind was made up. Before, I was determined that Chilya should not be exposed to the

dangers of the forest, to the discomfort of the long march and the lack of shelter at night. Now, with Abu Kajah agreeing with me in his unpleasantly oily fashion, I was determined that nothing on earth should take Chilya away from me, should make her return to the village with the fat old man who stood beside her. I took hold of her hand and prepared to lead her after the band of huntsmen now beginning to march once again along the forest track.

"You shall come with me, Chilya," I said.

A smile, as full of humour as the snarl of an angry leopard, broke for a second on the lips of Abu Kajah.

"I must thank you, Christian," he said, "for taking such care of my betrothed. I am truly grateful." And with another obsequious, mocking bow he walked away.

Immediately Chilya's expression of terror changed to one of mischievous delight.

"Well spoken, beloved," she whispered. "The fat old man shall trouble us no more. Now walk beside me, and tell me what animals we shall meet with in the forest."

For the rest of the day we marched on without catching a sign of animal life. Hunting in Africa must always be done in the early morning or at night. During the heat of the day the animals hide themselves in their jungle lairs and are completely invisible. No sound of human beings marching through the silence is enough to stir them from their midday sleep. Knowing this, we would ordinarily have rested, too, at noon, in order to prepare for the work of the evening; but on the first day's march we were anxious to penetrate as far as pos-

sible into the heart of the forest, where bigger and better game lurked, waiting for our spears.

Chilya kept up a continous stream of conversation at my side. Nothing seemed to disturb her, neither the innumerable insects that buzzed and hummed around our heads and clung stinging wherever a piece of flesh was exposed, nor the discomfort of the pathway, where fallen trees and tangled brambles and pools of mud and slime at times made walking well-nigh impossible. She just trotted gallantly along, excitedly pointing out a jewelled butterfly or a green-lacquered lizard, with such assurance that I wondered—all of a sudden, unreasonably jealous—if she were in the habit of accompanying all her lovers on their hunting expeditions. Then I looked down at her little upturned face, childishly eager and yet glowing with womanly tenderness, and knew that my unvoiced accusations were unjust, that now, at any rate, there existed no one in the world for her but me.

The undergrowth grew more and more tangled; the path, from being a well-marked one about four yards wide, narrowed until it was scarcely discernible among the clambering lianas; the clearings became less and less frequent; what little light had managed to penetrate the tree-tops gave way to an inky blackness in which strange, half-sweet, half-sour smells rose to our nostrils. It was useless to stumble further, blinded by darkness as we were, and in a little while the foremost of the Arabs halted. We were in a tiny clearing. Curt orders were issued, in response to which the black servants busied themselves in collecting sticks and making fires. When a circle of darting flames lit up the

twisted trunks of the surrounding trees and played gaily in the folds of the Arabs' robes, the men squatted down inside it with satisfied grunts, some lighting the pipes they had brought, others rolling over in preparation for a short sleep. I sat with Chilya's hand softly in mine, watching the million fireflies flashing their bright sparks hither and thither, conscious as always of the overpowering vastness of the forest around. So we waited for the moon to rise.

At length it came sailing proudly over the black tops of the trees, tipping every branch and leaf with silver, and casting white shafts of brilliant light into the clearing. Thereupon, several of the Arabs rose, collected their weapons, and glided out of the fire circle, followed by one or two of the blacks. The hunt was on !

The remainder of the Arabs took no notice of the departure of their fellows, but continued to smoke or sleep as though nothing had happened. I decided that they must take it in turns to go out and face the dangers of the darkness, and that to-night, at any rate, I would stay in the clearing with Chilya and see what the hunters would bring back.

I must have fallen asleep, one arm round Chilya's slender body, lulled by the gentle sighing of the breeze in the tree-tops, for when a sudden noise awoke me I started up, all my senses alert, trying to remember where I was. The grey light of dawn was creeping into the clearing, and the noise was caused by the Arabs, who were welcoming back the departed huntsmen. Each of these had slung across his back some sort of animal : a bush buck, a white-haired Colobus monkey, a lean wild pig. Each trophy

as it appeared was greeted with shouts of congratulation, and every hunter gave long demonstrations, with voice and gesture, of how he had managed to secure his prize. The ceremony did not even end there. A long pole was cut and smoothed. The dead animals were slung from it by their lashed feet. And then two of the blacks were deputed to take back the prizes to the village, where the meat would be salted and stored for future use.

Soon the march was resumed, and now I noticed for the first time that every step of the way was marked by notches cut in the tree-trunks, by branches twisted until they formed rough arrows, or by stones carefully arranged to show which way the hunters had taken. There was no danger that either we or the blacks should not be able to find our way back to the village. From time to time a small group of warriors detached itself from the main body and went off alone, intent on penetrating the virgin forest in search of more game. Others lagged further and further behind. At length there were only about ten of us—among whom, to my great disgust, was Abu Kajah—left marching along the scarcely perceptible track.

That evening, when the circle of fire had been made and the moon was risen, I slipped out, with M'bopa and Chilya at my heels, to try my luck. Chilya insisted on accompanying me, although I begged her not to at first.

"You would leave me with Abu Kajah?" she queried, incredulously. "Alone in the forest with him?"

I said no more.

As silently as possible we made our way through

the gloomy forest. Our feet sank sometimes over the knees in slime, rousing a horrid stench which clung unpleasantly to our clothes. Branches whipped across our faces. Winged things brushed against us and batted quickly away. Every now and then there was the sound of a sharp nick, as M'bopa notched the trees to show which way we had passed, and the white gash thus made gleamed in the darkness. We plunged on, further and further into the wild heart of the jungle.

Not a creature seemed to be stirring, though it was the time when beast hunted beast and the smaller animals fled in terror from their voracious enemies. The occasional cough of a monkey, the snort of a springing leopard, and the scream of a disturbed and angry bird: these were all the sounds we heard. Then suddenly, stumbling through a thicket of more than ordinary impenetrability, whose interlaced and thorny branches pricked me unmercifully, I heard a faint, scarcely perceptible rustle. The tree-tops overhead swayed apart for an instant as a gust of wind shook them, and through the temporary space a shaft of moonlight shone down whitely. It revealed an animal crouched at the further end of the thicket, an animal whose dark body was striped, zebra-like, with black and white.

It was an okapi.

This, of course, all occurred at the beginning of the present century, when this strange creature, half-giraffe, half-zebra, was regarded almost as a legend, and when only a few dead examples had been sent out of Africa. Tales of it had reached most of the coastal towns, exaggerated to different proportions according to the imagination of the teller, but

I had never hoped to see one alive, in its native haunt, one of the most beautiful sights that any hunter could hope to see.

Although our approach had been almost silent, the okapi seemed to have sensed us, for she rose to her feet, her long, flexible neck bent inquiringly in our direction. Her soft nose snuffed the air. In that instant, as I gazed enthralled at the ungainly and yet peculiarly graceful creature, the tree-tops swayed together again, blotted out the moon, and we were once again in darkness.

I had no intention in the world of harming such a beautiful creature. At that minute, all thoughts of Chilya, breathing warmly in my ear, were banished. Abu Kajah could have appeared and led her away and I should still have been gazing spellbound at the spot where I thought the okapi to be. Huntsman though I had set out to be, I could no more have killed it than I could have killed one of my mighty gorilla friends. But M'bopa was not so squeamish. Before I understood what he was about, he had leaped forward, his knife clenched in his hand. Cat-like, he seemed able to see in the darkness. There was the crash of trampled undergrowth, a queer sound, half-scream, half-gurgle, from the okapi, a shout of triumph from M'bopa. And then the black man reappeared at my side, dragging behind him the still kicking body of the beautiful creature.

It had all happened so suddenly that I could not grasp it at first. When at last I realized that the okapi, the first and last of its kind that I was ever privileged to see in the wilds of the jungle, was lying dead at my feet, my anger could scarcely be contained. I laid my hands on M'bopa's shoulders

and shook him backwards and forwards, despite the darkness and the overhanging bushes, cursing and swearing at him. Chilya laid a hand timidly on my arm, but I flung it off. Curtly I ordered them to sling the dead body of the okapi on to a branch and carry it back to camp. Then, glum and silent, living again and again the awful moment when I had heard the death-scream of the helpless okapi and knew that it was being killed principally because of me, I followed them through the darkness of the forest, the forest whose trust I had for the first time betrayed.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THE CURSE FALLS

IT was dawn when we returned to the camp. The rest of the diminished hunting-party were gathered round the ashy fires, waiting for our appearance. As soon as we emerged through the trees and they saw the okapi hanging from the branch carried by Chilya and M'bopa, they let out a subdued shout and rose from their squatting positions. Their dark eyes gleamed when they looked at my prize. I saw a strange look, half of envy, half of some emotion I could not fathom, on Abu Kajah's greasy countenance.

All the way back I had not heard one word of reproach from Chilya. Ordinarily fiery and imperious, quick to sense an insult and demand payment for it, she bore the indignity of her burden—a Sheikh's daughter shouldering a load behind a black man—without a single complaint. Subconsciously—for I was too upset to feel any conscious emotion other than one of overwhelming anger—I loved her the more for her sensitive understanding. She seemed to sense that something was amiss, that I was displeased with what had happened on the hunt and was wreaking my anger on her and M'bopa, and she refrained from any questions.

The Arabs clustered round us.

"A *kenge!* A *kenge!*" they shouted. "The Christian has killed a *kenge!* We can sell its skin and get much tea and tobacco and many golden ornaments for our wives."

"No!" said some others. "We will stuff it with leaves and fibre, and then traders will give us a great price for it."

I strode over to the edge of the clearing where we had made camp the previous night and sat down glumly. Let them decide what they liked about the okapi. I had no further interest in it. What use were dead animals, animals which were dead because of me? I sulked bitterly.

A soft hand on my arm interrupted my thoughts.

"What is it, beloved?" It was Chilya's gentle voice speaking to me. "Why do you shrink from me and from everyone? What have we done that offends you?"

Angrily and incoherently, I muttered something about the okapi.

"But, beloved,"—her voice was frankly incredulous—"it is a good *kenge!* It will bring you many riches. It will even," her voice dropped, "it will even help you to take me for your wife, if you still desire me. So why are you angered, beloved?"

I knew in my heart that it would be hopeless to try to tell her my point of view, to show her how I hated the killing of innocent animals, and yet for some reason or other I made an attempt to convince her.

"Three hours ago, Chilya, that *kenge*—as you call it—was alive. It lay in the woods, happily, eating its food, and waiting, perhaps, for its mate to return. It did no harm to us and never even knew of our

existence. Now it is dead. Its mate calls for it in vain. It can no longer feed on juicy vines, or seek the comfortable darkness. It is dead, Chilya, and we have killed it."

I looked up at her as she bent over me, her long hair falling over my face, half hoping to see tears in her eyes, in token of her compassion for the dead okapi; but instead there was only a look of complete astonishment on her countenance.

"But, beloved," she murmured, "it is only an animal. Why do you trouble so about an animal? I cannot understand."

She was so bewildered, so pathetically anxious to comprehend my point of view, that I could not be angry with her. And, after all, the killing of the okapi had been M'bopa's work and not hers. I smiled at her and took her hand. Her face lit up marvellously.

"Don't trouble about it any more," I said. "Only understand that I cannot have animals killed, either for your sake or for mine. They are my friends, and I will not betray them."

"But your riches?" she queried. "How will you find enough to buy me from my father? How will you collect more wealth than Abu Kajah? There are but two weeks now, and I shall have to go to him." She shuddered pitifully.

"We will find a way," I reassured her.

And with that she had to be content.

Next, M'bopa had to be reckoned with. I was perfectly well aware that he was in no way to blame for what he had done, that it was as normal for him to kill the okapi as for me not to do so. He knew that we were on a hunting expedition; he

knew that the okapi was a rare and valuable beast : what more natural, therefore, than that he should want to capture and kill it for his master's sake ? Yet I had to show him in some way that the hunting expedition, in my opinion, was wicked ; I had to make it clear that as far as I was concerned, there was no more killing to be done ; and I cast around for a method of convincing him.

I explained my views to him in the same way as I had done to Chilya, but he refused point-blank to understand them. He shook his head vigorously.

" No ! No ! No ! " he cried. " The okapi is good to kill. It will make tender meat, and for the skin, white men at the stations will give gold, much, much gold. I am glad I killed it."

Seeing that remonstrance was useless, I changed my tactics and began warning him of the consequences that would ensue if he dared to go against my wishes and kill any more animals.

" I shall beat you hard, as hard as I can, and leave you alone in the forest," I thundered, trying to sound as terrifying as possible.

He only shrugged his shoulders, insolently, I thought.

" I do not understand you, Master," he said.

How could I show him that I was serious, that I wanted to protect the animals of the forest ? My hand, sweeping downward in a gesture of impatience, encountered the Dried Head still hanging at my waist and now almost battered beyond recognition by the branches and stems which continually brushed against it. A thought came into my mind. I unstrapped the Head carefully and held it in front of M'bopa.

" You shall carry this around with you," I said, " as a punishment for killing the okapi when I had not given you the word."

Terror flooded his face. He shrank away from me, backing so that he would not come into contact with the bruised relic.

" No, Master," he stuttered, " take it away ! It bears a curse, the curse of the Witch Doctor ! All who touch it will die ! It is an evil *ju-ju*, Master ! "

" Don't be absurd," I replied. " Have I not worn it all this time without any harm coming to me ? Did not the Witch Doctor curse me, too ? It is nothing but a plaything. Come," and I strapped it to his waist.

He looked down at it fearfully, but protested no more.

If I had been less furiously angry with M'bopa for killing the beautiful okapi, if I had stopped to consider for a moment his obvious repugnance for the Dried Head, I might have continued to wear it, and then—who knows ?—the tragedies that followed might have been averted. I refuse to believe in the powers of magic ; witch doctors I have unmasked time after time, knowing that the hold they wield over their subjects is due to the gullibility of the natives rather than to the superhuman powers of the Medicine Men. Yet, whether it was due to the invocation placed on the Dried Head, or to the long arm of coincidence which stretches to a hundred unexpected places, the fact remained that the curse was horribly fulfilled, bringing disaster and death in its train.

Meanwhile, we continued our journey. Before the march was resumed the okapi was tied by its

slender striped legs to a pole, in company with six other animals that had been killed that night, and two of the remaining blacks were instructed to bear it back to the village. The last glimpse of it I had, before the little cavalcade disappeared into the forest, was its dark, purplish-brown back, and the pale, striped legs sticking pathetically up into the air.

We marched further than usual that day. The forest was less dense, and just before the noon siesta we came across a little creek of black, sluggish water along whose bank we were able to travel with ease. Water-vines and wild onions—which the natives call *m'fondo*—grew in the reedy marshes on either side, and when I saw them my heart jumped, and a sudden, almost incredible hope took possession of me. For where the *m'fondo* and the water-vine grow, there the gorilla is found, for these two plants form his favourite food.

The Arabs, too, seemed to know what the vines and the onions portended, for they whispered together excitedly, and Abu Kajah—the only member of the party who boasted a gun—looked at his weapon lovingly and made sure that it was loaded. Horror suddenly seized me. Was I about to witness the massacre of some of those beloved jungle friends of mine ? I vowed to myself that I would rather die than that one of them should be harmed.

The creek grew wider, and a few rocks appeared in midstream, grey-green like the gnarled backs of crocodiles. An occasional ripple hissed as it broke gently against them. Then suddenly, as we stole silently forward as though conscious that something extraordinary lay ahead, we emerged from the forest

on to a rocky plain, where across the river a low tableland stretched down to the water's edge, dotted with trees and covered in places with a short, thorny scrub. On the tableland was a sight as wonderful as it has ever been my good fortune to see. Prancing round, huge and shaggy, looking almost like some primeval monsters as they indulged in their weird antics, were about twenty magnificent gorilla.

Amazement, delight, incredulity, chased each other backwards and forwards in my mind. I had felt that perhaps I should never see a gorilla again, never recapture the happiness I had known during my first visit to Africa, when I had lived as a brother with the great apes of the jungle ; and yet here once more were the beasts I loved, the mighty kings of the forest, and my heart leaped. Almost I rushed forward, my mouth open to utter the cry of welcome, secure in the knowledge that the huge yet gentle creatures would not harm me, but would greet me as a long-lost friend. Then I remembered where I was, who was with me. Surrounded as I was by a party of Arabs, the gorilla might take fright, might disregard my manifestations of friendship, and launch an attack. I decided, therefore, to wait a little and watch what was going on.

About six huge males were prancing round on the stretch of flat rock, while a number of females crouched in the shadow of the trees and thorn-bushes, watching. Roars, rumbling like peal after peal of thunder, filled the air, and as the apes banged their hairy chests it was as though a hundred native drums rolled dully. My mind rushed back to those old days in the forest, and I knew at once what was happening. The males were courting the

females, showing off before them, as a peacock spreads his plumes before the hen.

Travellers had told me tales of the 'bouncing grounds' of the gorilla, where the males sported before the females and made love to them, but although I had lived many months in company with the anthropoids, I had never encountered these mating-places before; presumably because I had usually known isolated families and rarely met with a great herd such as the one now before me. I watched, therefore, with wide eyes at the magnificent spectacle.

'Bouncing' was a perfect description of the weird antics of the gorilla. They sidled down from the rocks to the tableland in a peculiarly sheepish manner, reared up on their hind legs and began to beat their shaggy breasts with their closed fists, uttering roar upon roar as they did so. Then suddenly they would run sideways, their long fore-arms hanging loose, drop all at once on to all fours, and bounce up and down like rubber balls. It was a queer, bunched-up movement, very springy, seeming to come chiefly from the shoulders, and continuous, as though one bounce gave enough volition to produce the next.

Gradually, as we watched, the apes seemed to tire of such strenuous courtship. The bouncing grew slower and less springy; the little clucks of encouragement which the performers gave to attract the attention of the females further, became softer. Then slowly, from their hiding-places behind the trees, the females began to advance towards them, coyly, yet unwaveringly, and the gigantic love-making began.

It was a wonderful sight. I heard Chilya, who was crouching motionless beside me, from time to time clutching my arm, gasp with astonishment, as the males began to caress the females, gently, tenderly, all the time uttering little chirrups of affection. They treated them as though they were exquisite, fragile pieces of Dresden china, instead of animals weighing four to five hundred pounds. It was one of the most charming, and at the same time one of the most awe-inspiring, sights that I have ever seen.

So lost was I in contemplation of the magnificent gorillas, so busy re-living my past experiences in the forest, that I forgot the Arabs, forgot even Chilya, until a sound suddenly smote upon my ear, a soft, barely perceptible sound, yet one of infinite malevolence and omen : the click of the closing breech of a gun.

Instantly, as though waking from a dream, I remembered where I was, and in whose company. I looked round. A hundred paces away, crouched behind a tall bush, was Abu Kajah, his gun cocked, the deadly weapon aimed at the heart of the nearest gorilla, a huge male who was gently stroking the shoulder of his mate with one ponderous, loving paw.

My mind functioned with the rapidity of lightning. I scarcely thought before I acted. All I knew was that one of my beloved friends was in danger and I must save him at all costs. Snatching from my belt the knife which the Sheikh had given me, I flung it with all my strength at the head of Abu Kajah, then I rushed out into full view of the apes and screamed to them the scream of fear and warning, the high-

pitched, diabolical-sounding shriek which they use to tell each other that danger is near. At the same time a deafening report filled the air.

Immediately everything was in confusion. The Arabs, terrified of a charge from the frightened apes, turned tail and crashed through the undergrowth, away up the river bank. The apes, screaming with fear and anger, scrambled up over the rocks and out of sight. Only one, blood streaming from a wound in his shoulder, shambled down the rocks towards us, and began to wade the creek. Abu Kajah lay motionless on the ground, the still smoking gun at his side.

Strangest of all was the action of M'bopa. As though he had suddenly become demented, he rushed out from the covering bushes—as I had done—and fled down to the water's edge, straight in the path of the infuriated gorilla. His eyes rolled wildly and his whole body shook as though he were suffering from a virulent jungle fever. At the bank of the stream he knelt down in a strangely supplicating attitude and waited for the ape to emerge.

It was the most ridiculous, foolhardy thing I have ever seen a man do, and for a black—usually the most timorous and cowardly of creatures—it savoured of the fantastic, almost the impossible. I called to him to come away, knowing the wild rage of a wounded gorilla and how it will vent its anger on anything in its path, making my voice sound as stern and commanding as possible; but M'bopa took no notice, and I began to run quickly forward.

By this time the gorilla had reached the bank and was shuffling on to the dry land, its little brown

eyes glinting angrily, banging its chest and roaring as it came. The blood from its shoulder stained the dark fur crimson and clotted blackly in places. Suddenly it caught sight of the black man. The crest rose fan-like on its head. The lips gaped back to reveal rows of hideous teeth. It rushed furiously forward.

Horrified, I flung back my head and gave utterance to the old gorilla call of friendship, the cry which—a century ago, it seemed—I had used to bring a great concourse of apes together. Would it distract him from his purpose? Would he turn and face what, presumably, he would think to be a strange member of his own tribe? Alas for the hope! He never even hesitated. Over to the recumbent figure he lurched, and almost in an instant had caught up the unfortunate man. The great muscles rippled under the shaggy skin; the head sank forward; there was a hideous, appalling scream, and a snarl of rage from the ape. For a second I saw the limp body of M'bopa writhing in the gorilla's huge arms, and then it was flung aside, and with a further scream, half of anger, half of pain from the gun-shot wound, the creature began methodically to trample its victim's life away.

I could stand no more. The gorilla, I knew, had been maddened by its wound and was now almost berserk, and there was every excuse for its rage. But M'bopa had been my companion for many months, and even though his own insane foolishness had brought him to such an awful predicament, I could not desert him. I strode forward, therefore, until the gorilla was barely a hundred feet away, beat my breast and began to roar a challenge, the

nerve-shattering, bloodcurdling roar with which the apes greet the rising sun each morning.

He stopped in his gruesome task of stamping the breath out of poor M'bopa's body, and looked at me. His little eyes blinked. The crest on his head slowly sank until it could scarcely be seen. Surprise and curiosity—the biggest motive-power of all gorilla action—were visible on his face. I felt it was time for me to speak again, and so I made the friendly sound, half-grunt, half-cluck, which the animals use when playing together.

"Ah, Ah, Ah. Oh. Oh. Oh," I grunted.

"Ough. Ough," he replied, doubtfully.

I walked nearer. At last I had managed to distract his attention from the still and horribly mangled form on the ground; but, even so, he would not show friendship towards me. His caution was too great for that. He took one tentative step forward, and then he turned suddenly, galloped with a rapid four-legged movement to the stream, and waded across it. With incredible speed, considering his vast bulk, he clambered over the rocks, looking over his shoulder once or twice to see if he were being followed. In a short time he had disappeared.

I stood looking regretfully after him until a low moan recalled me to the pitiful figure lying at my feet. I bent over it. M'bopa's eyes were already curtained with the glaze of death. His neck and shoulders were horribly mangled, long red gashes showing where the gorilla's nails had ripped him, and where the mighty teeth had bitten deep. His face was a queer, purplish grey. His lips moved faintly and I placed my ear against them to catch the words.

" The curse, Master," he muttered ; and I could have sworn that a faint, shadowy smile curved his mouth for an instant, " it was a powerful curse, after all. You should never have made me carry the *ju-ju :* it was evil." His voice rose to a shriek, and wandered off into some weird incantation—obviously a spell for warding off evil, but so involved that I could not follow it—and then suddenly he began to address me again. " You had better beware of the *ju-ju*, Master ; you had better beware——" And then with a jerk his head dropped back and he lay dead on the ground, his eyes staring skywards, his mouth open, with that strange suggestion of a smile still playing upon it.

There was a step behind me, and I turned round to see Chilya. Terror had transformed her face to a pale, waxen mask. Her hands fluttered piteously.

" Beloved, come quickly ! " she whispered. " Abu Kajah is dead, and soon the rest of the tribe will search you out and kill you for the deed. As soon as it is quiet again, and the great beasts have gone, my people will venture out to look for you. Come, beloved, let us run quickly and escape from them."

" But where can we go ? We shall only wander in the depths of the forest until we are lost and can go no further."

" Better that than that you should be killed by my people," she murmured. " You do not know what horrible tortures await those who disobey the law of the tribe by shedding blood. It is awful, awful ! I could not bear it ! " She clung to me, sobbing piteously, and at the same time trying to draw me away into the woods.

My mind refused to function. M'bopa was dead ;

the gorillas had come and gone ; and now, according to Chilya, the Arabs were thirsting for my blood. I suddenly remembered Abu Kajah, and my brain turned a back-somersault, as it were.

" But I only threw my knife at him," I queried incredulously. " He can't be dead ! "

For the first time I saw fear, not for me but for herself, gleam in Chilya's dark eyes. She shuffled her feet nervously.

" I found him lying on the ground," she whispered. " Your knife had stunned him, and he did not see me, nor did he speak. I picked up the weapon, beloved, to—to give it back to you, and suddenly something seemed to snap behind my eyes, and I plunged it—that gleaming dagger—straight into his heart. And I am glad," she finished defiantly. " He was an evil old man and it is good that he is dead and will trouble us no more."

I looked at her, at her flushed face and at the breast which heaved so proudly beneath the scarlet waistcoat, and I felt neither surprise nor anger that I should have been accused of something which she had done. So much had happened in the past half-hour that I could wonder at nothing more. Mechanically I stooped down and began to dig with my fingers in the soft earth of the river bank.

" What are you making, beloved ? "

" A grave," I answered shortly.

Chilya—wise girl that she was—said no more, but bent also and began to scoop out the damp mud. Soon there was a cavity big enough to hold M'bopa's body. I looked at him for a moment, lying there so still and bedraggled ; and for some reason which even to-day I cannot wholly fathom, I took the

Dried Head from his belt, where I had put it such a little while ago, and replaced it on mine. Against his will I had forced him to wear the hated relic and—whether because of that or no—he had met his death. It seemed to me that now I must also dare the curse, in expiation.

Gently I lifted him and lowered him into the rough grave. I closed his staring eyes and for an instant laid my hand on his woolly, blood-soaked head. Then quickly I began to throw over him the earth and mud, helped by the eager Chilya, hiding from view the man who had been my travelling companion for so long.

"At least," I said to myself, "the hyenas and vultures won't get him now."

Then, taking Chilya's hand in mine, I turned my back on the river and disappeared once more into the gloom of the forest.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THE END OF IT ALL

THE forest was silent. As we stole along between the trees that stood trunk by trunk like Doric columns, we could hear nothing save the sound of our own footsteps, now squelching over soft muddy slime, now snapping a fallen twig. Of the Arabs there was no sign at all, but a look at Chilya's terrified face told me that they could not be very far away, and so I hurried along with her as quickly as I could. As I went I ran over in my mind the amazing and tragic events of the past hour.

I was chiefly puzzled about M'bopa's death. I could not imagine what had possessed him to rush out in front of the wounded and enraged gorilla and offer himself so patently as a victim. It was sheer lunacy, lunacy which had brought the black man to his terrible death. What explanation was there? I thought hard.

Suddenly I remembered a story which the negro had told me long ago, a story of the election of the Witch Doctor on the unexpected death of his predecessor: how the winner—the present Medicine Man of the tribe, the one who had banished and cursed me, the villain who had been responsible for the death of poor 'Jim'—had won the admiration of the tribe by making them believe he was half-

gorilla, half-man. All had believed implicitly that he was a sort of were-ape. Had M'bopa, gullible like all his fellow-blacks, and possibly never having seen a live gorilla before—much less a wounded one launching an attack on his enemies—taken the furious anthropoid to be the Witch Doctor, come to fulfil his curse? Was it possible that credulity could be carried to such great lengths? There was no way in which I could find out, nor did I ever discover if my supposition were the correct one; but, knowing the African native as well as I do, I can think of no other theory that would so well fit the facts.

Through the colonnaded trees there came the gleam of water. The stream seemed to have doubled back on itself and was now flowing along southwards quite like a respectable, civilized river, with creeks and little eddies along its banks where storks and spoonbills paddled daintily for worms. Crocodiles slithered ponderously from the sand-bars at our approach and launched themselves into the water with a flirt of their scaly tails, scattering the plovers that had been scavenging for leeches among the sharp fangs. It was all so idyllic that I longed to saunter as slowly as possible along the bank, pointing out its beauties to Chilya, trying to forget the tragedy that had haunted us like an evil spell; but the fact that we were fleeing from the Arabs lent spurs to our feet and instead of dawdling, we rushed on as fast as we could.

When we had been journeying for the rest of that day, had slept for a few brief hours perched in the forks of trees, and then had travelled until noon the following morning, without a sign that the Arabs were on our track, I decided that the time had come

for me to talk seriously to Chilya—if such a butterfly person could remain serious for any appreciable length of time—about the future. I sat her down beneath a spreading mahogany, whose thick branches formed a shade from the scorching sun, and began to talk to her.

As I had feared, her volatile mind refused to keep on the subject under discussion. When I asked her what she intended to do and where she intended to go, she hardly heeded my words, but jumped to her feet in pursuit of a brilliantly shimmering red butterfly which hovered for a moment and then fluttered off across the river.

"Why, stay with you, beloved!" she cried gaily, intent on catching the winged insect.

"But your father," I protested. "You cannot desert him. What will he feel when the huntsmen return with the news that they have lost you? It is cruel to leave him in such ignorance."

"You have forgotten Abu Kajah," she replied softly. "If you go back to the village it will mean death for you, oh my beloved. And," her dark, almond-shaped eyes gazed at me incredulously, "you cannot expect me to return alone. I could never find the way, and soon the wild beasts would find me out. Beloved, you cannot expect me to go alone?"

Two thoughts filled my brain: the first, that for me, too, it would be wellnigh impossible to find the way back to the village of the lost tribe, completely ignorant of my whereabouts as I was; the second, that I could not bear the thought of losing Chilya. I had become used to her presence near me, to her liberal, spontaneous affection, her clinging arms and

infectious merriment, and life without her promised to be an existence devoid of all that was gay and beautiful. I called her back to me. The red butterfly thankfully flitted away across the stream.

"You shall not go," I told her. "We will dare the dangers of the forest together and see what Fate brings to us. I have spoken."

She gave a delighted little laugh and immediately skipped off again in search of a fresh amusement, as if unable to stand still for more than a minute. Her little feet twinkled beneath the flapping trousers.

"At least, I shall never be dull in her company," I thought to myself, wryly.

It was on the fifth day that we suddenly heard the sound we had been dreading to hear: the sound of men marching, the snap and crackle of undergrowth, and the chattering of disturbed monkeys. Chilya, who had been dancing along as usual, pushing aside the greedy, clinging brambles and leaping gazelle-like over the numerous fallen trees, rushed up to me, her lower lip trembling piteously.

"They have come for you," she wailed. "They have come to kill you! Oh, what can I do to save you?"

All at once her eyes fell on the Dried Head still hanging from my belt, and her wailing ceased magically. Deftly she unfastened the battered relic, and with a strange look of mingled pride and fear on her face, she tied it round her own slender waist.

"Now, beloved," she whispered, "if the Head is cursed, it will not be you on whom the curse falls. I killed Abu Kajah, and it is I who should take the blame. Let the curse do to me as it wills."

I was profoundly touched by her action, a heroic

enough one if she really did believe that the Head could work evil on its wearer ; but—fool that I was —I made no attempt to recover the relic from her. I did not believe that it bore a curse which could traverse time and space. Perhaps M'bopa's death should have warned me that the spells of African witch doctors are not to be trifled with, that some things cannot be dismissed lightly and with a sceptical smile. To-day, I never cease to reproach myself for my superciliousness. For all I know, it may have been the cause of Chilya's death.

We did not wait to see if it were indeed the Arabs coming towards us so noisily through the forest. There was a feeling of self-assurance about the sound of them that I did not like, as though they were sure of capturing us and were not going to hurry over the business more than necessary. Rushing towards the river, we began to run along the bank, where the trees were spread further apart and made progress easier. Our feet sank in the mud, and the wading birds rose with squawks of protest at being thus disturbed over their morning meal and flapped heavily away, threatening to divulge our whereabouts to our pursuers. We hurried on.

At length a short, thick log of wood lying at the water's edge caught my attention and gave me an idea. Would it not be quicker and easier to travel by water, with the current that slowly but regularly flowed southwards ? I communicated my idea to Chilya, but she was not enthusiastic. I have often found that Arabs, possibly because they are creatures of the desert, dislike the thought of water journeys. However, this time I could not consider her feelings. Stopping to talk, we could hear the pursuers crashing

their way through the undergrowth not a quarter of a mile away, and I realized that there was no choice. We should have to make use of the river.

Pushing and straining, I managed to roll the log into the water and bade Chilya sit on it. It was high and thick, with branches protruding each side into the water, so that she could place her feet on the supports thus made and keep them away from any curious or hungry saurians. I gave her a flat branch to use as a paddle, and then, cutting a similar one for myself, I mounted the log and we pushed off.

It was a strange, perilous journey. The log swayed dangerously at every swirl of the current and Chilya clutched me frantically round the waist, terrified of being thrown into the eater. Grey shapes floated near, armed with rows of gleaming fangs that made us draw up our legs nervously. Herds of hippo drifted ponderously by, open-mouthed, some with their calves upon their backs, and sank at sight of us until only their round, hairless faces were visible above the dark water. In the evening, when they left the water to feed, the papyrus-swamps at the side of the river were full of them. Birds shrieked and chattered, darting from bank to bank with a flash of jewelled wings, or paddled statelily in the shallows, fishing delicately in the mud for titbits. We drifted on and on, day after day.

At night we beached our primitive boat and climbed into any convenient trees on the river bank. For food we collected fruits and herbs, the root of the wild carrot and the parsnip, bananas, raspberries, and paw-paws, anything we could lay hands on and which seemed edible. There was neither the time nor the opportunity for discrimination. Chilya nobly

entered into the spirit of the flight and began to treat the whole thing as an exciting adventure. Even when we seemed quite to have shaken off our pursuers and there was no need for such rapid progress, she persisted in putting her ear to the ground from time to time when we landed, to acquaint me with the news that she could hear nothing. Once more I congratulated myself on my travelling companion.

We had been journeying for about three weeks—still using our ' boat ', although the need for haste seemed quite to have passed—when one morning, as we floated down the river, I failed to hear Chilya's paddle cleaving the water behind me. She was being lazy, I decided, and rather brusquely told her to wake up and get on with the work. There was no answer. I looked round, and to my horror saw that she had slipped sideways on the log and was lying almost across it, her head dangling precariously towards the crocodile-infested water.

" Chilya ! What is the matter ? " I cried urgently.

There was no reply, only a low moan, and a faint panting breath that caused me to send the log flying to the bank. A heron took heavily to its wings and flapped protestingly away. I beached the craft, leaped off and rushed to gather Chilya into my arms. Her head and arms hung down slackly. Her eyes were closed. Her little oval face was a greyish colour and damp with sweat.

" Chilya ! Chilya ! " I called, shaking her to try to rouse her from her coma.

The almond-shaped eyes opened a fraction of an inch, and a tiny smile played for a second over her grey lips.

" Beloved," she whispered, " it is so cold here in the forest. Hold me tightly, beloved, and make me me warm."

A sudden paroxysm shook her. Her teeth chattered. Violent tremors shook her frail body. I felt her hands and feet : they were stone-cold and blanched to a dead yellow, and I began to chafe them hurriedly. Removing my Arab blanket—for I was dressed in Arab fashion—I wrapped it round her, trying to keep out the cold she complained of. I brought water from the river and bathed her damp face.

There is nothing so appalling in its helplessness as watching the pain of some loved person, knowing you cannot share it, unable to do anything to relieve it. Chilya, I knew from my own experience, was suffering from some form of jungle fever, but I could do nothing to help her. The fever had to take its course and all I could do was to wait. Soon—as I expected—she began to toss and turn, throwing off the blanket, muttering deliriously to herself. Her face, from being grey, turned to a fiery red. Her little fingers dug wildly into the ground.

All that afternoon and night the fever raged, and I sat by Chilya's side, tormented by her sufferings, enraged at my helplessness, trying to soothe her by my presence, whispering gently into her ear and replacing the blanket on her fever-racked body. Although she was only semi-conscious she seemed to know that I was near, and groped wildly for my hand whenever I took it away.

When the fever showed no signs of abating the next morning I decided that something must be done. Chilya's face was drawn and pinched as though

the flesh were wasting away from the cheek-bones, and her eyes were sunk deep into their sockets and ringed with thick black lines that had not been pencilled in with kohl. Her lips were dry and cracked and had turned a pale purplish colour. I decided that I must try to carry her back to civilization.

I had no idea where we were, in the whole of the dense African forest, but I felt sure that there must be some human habitation somewhere not too far away, some village beneath whose roof Chilya might rest and recover, away from the dank steaminess of the forest and the innumerable pestering insects. Accordingly, that afternoon I picked her up—she was as light in my arms as a child—laid her gently in front of me on the log and began paddling rapidly downstream.

It was a nightmare journey. It is perhaps that quality—as of a bad dream—that to-day enables me to write dispassionately of that race with death, of that terrible attempt to save the life of my beautiful Chilya. The crocodiles, as if knowing that sickness was aboard, gathered in horrid numbers in expectation of a feast. The insects were appalling in their persistence. Worst of all, Chilya's condition did not seem to be improving : she was listless, often unconscious, calling all the time for water and then dashing it away when I held some to her parched lips, alternately icy cold and burning hot. I wondered desperately if I should ever reach civilization in time.

On the third day, just when I was beginning to feel that I could not endure another minute of the nerve-racking struggle—for I was so busy attending to Chilya that I had no time to procure food for

myself and often had to go without—shouts came from the left bank of the river and an arrow fell with a plop into the water at my side. Looking round, I saw two leaping black figures on the bank, one in the act of loosening a second arrow from his primitive bow. I shouted to him to stop and then guided the log into the bank and confronted the newcomers.

They seemed hostile, and it was not until their attention was diverted at sight of Chilya lying pale and still in my arms, that their scowls softened a little in curiosity. They gabbled together in *ki-swahili*, telling each other that the woman was sick ; and then suddenly they began talking about an Arab. What Arab ? I wondered. It was with a shock of surprise that I realized by their gestures that they were referring to me.

At the beginning of the century slave-traders still carried on their hideous traffic in human flesh, bands of Arabs frequently coming down through the woods and capturing hundreds of negroes to sell in the market-places at Zanzibar. In return the natives killed every Arab they saw and—if they were cannibals—ate his body with much rejoicing. Remembering my Arab clothes, my unshaven beard and sun-darkened skin, I realized that the natives could hardly be blamed for their mistake. I was in a tight corner. With Chilya to look after, I had to be doubly careful.

I used all the Bantu eloquence of which I was capable to convince those two natives that I was not an Arab. Perhaps anxiety for Chilya lent my tongue unknown powers of persuasion ; perhaps on looking closely the blacks realized they had made a mistake.

At any rate, after chattering together excitedly, obviously wondering if they dare let me go, they lowered their weapons.

"What proof have we that you are not come to take our wives and children captive?" they asked. "How do we know that it is the truth that you speak?"

I pondered. It was presents they wanted: presents that would prove to them that I was a friend. But what had I to give them? My Arab cloak was in ribbons; my blanket was wrapped round Chilya. I had no gold or trinkets. Then suddenly I thought of Chilya. It was she who must save us. In order to placate the negroes I should have to despoil her of the few jewels that she still wore.

I took the little sparkling studs from between her toes and handed them to the blacks, who took them greedily. I removed her tiny scarlet waistcoat with its jingling coins and handed that over also.

Then, as they grinned at the bright colour and the gold coins, I asked them again if they would let us pass.

"You believe now that I am no Arab?"

"Yes, *Msangu*," they replied, "we believe you." The presents made them wax confidential. "A day and half a day's march from over there," and they pointed, as far as I could see, due south, in the direction of the river, "there is a white man's *zareba*. They are good, the white men; they help us to fight the slavers. If you went to them perhaps they could help the woman. They have a great white Witch Doctor."

Gratitude made me almost incoherent. White

men ! Surely among them I could find someone who would know what could be done for Chilya ? I gathered her up in my arms and began to walk swiftly in the direction pointed out by the blacks. She moaned softly as I carried her. Soon I had left the natives a long way behind. They made no attempt to follow me.

All that day I carried Chilya through the jungle, only resting when the humid heat grew too much for me to bear. For once I hated the forest, loathed its luxuriant creepers and majestic trees, cursed the birds and butterflies that fluttered in my face, because it was hindering me, doing its best to make me lose the race I was running. As for Chilya, my gay and lovely Chilya, she seemed to be fading away before my eyes. Her face was waxen in its paleness—she might have been already dead—and the flesh seemed to shrink away from her bones. Only once did she open her eyes and softly murmur my name.

When night fell I sat with my back to a stout tree, Chilya clasped in my arms, waiting for the dawn to break and wondering if any wild animals would take it into their heads to make an attack. Chilya seemed to my fevered imagination to grow colder and colder. I rubbed her chill fingers, trying to infuse a little warmth into them. Occasionally she would start up, breathing laboriously with a painful constriction of the throat, only to sink back again in my arms exhausted and pale.

" If only I could do something for her ! " I cried aloud, aghast at my impotence.

As soon as a little ray of light broke through the trees I was on my way again, following the tiny

path which led through the undergrowth. On and on I stumbled, tripping over roots and fallen branches, at times sinking knee-deep in thick, noisome slime, or hitting my head against low-spreading boughs. It was a hideous, appalling nightmare, one which recurs to me even to-day in the civilized security of London. When at length I came to the end of the journey, I was past all rejoicing. I dared not even hope that I had reached the station after all.

But I had. A strong palisade of pointed sticks suddenly appeared round a small clearing. Inside I glimpsed wooden huts and a few tents, and at one end what looked like a large fort. A Haussa, a rifle in his hand and a red fez perched on his head, stood guard at the entrance. I rushed forward, Chilya still clutched tightly in my arms, and collapsed in a heap at his feet.

There was a long interval, during which a succession of images and impressions chased themselves round my aching head, an interval which might have lasted five minutes or five days, for all I know. I awoke to find a man in a white linen suit bending over me. His eyes were blue and kind.

"You are better, *Monsieur?*" he asked. He spoke in French.

I started up from the bed on which I was lying.

"Chilya!" I gasped. "I left her outside. Where is she?" I must have been delirious, for it seemed to me that Chilya was still outside, lying where I had dropped her. "I must go to her! I must go to her!"

The stranger beside me laid a hand gently on my arm and motioned me to lie back.

"Do not worry yourself, *Monsieur*. She is looked

after. Drink this," holding a cup to my lips, " and you will soon be well."

Some time must have elapsed, during which I was in a strange state between sleep and waking, in a sort of pleasant half-doze. Then gradually the effect of the opiate wore off. My brain cleared. I remembered everything, and jumped out of bed—a little shakily—and went outside.

The first person I saw was the stranger who had given me the sleeping-draught. He was walking slowly, carrying in his hands a cluster of hibiscus and scarlet frangipani. For some reason which I was not able to fathom at the time, I decided to follow.

He walked a little way beyond the circle of huts to a small patch of ground at the back of the fort. His footsteps led him to a tiny mound at one end, covered with newly-dug earth. It looked like a grave.

My mind suddenly went numb. Forgetting that he was unconscious of my presence, I blurted out a question.

" Whose grave is that ? "

The man turned. His blue eyes were very kind. The red flowers hung from his hand. Gravely he crossed himself.

" *Mon ami,*" he said gently, " you must be brave—very brave—and prepare for sad news. She—she was dead when we brought her in. She must have died as you carried her through the forest."

I think I must have known all the time, that Chilya would never recover, that that nightmare journey through the forest was hopeless, even before we started. Everything—in spite of the burning sun overhead—went suddenly cold and cheerless.

"At least you might have let me see her," I cried.

"My son, do you know how long it is since you came here? A week. You have been so ill that it was all we could do to save you." All at once his voice grew a little uncertain. He stooped and took something from the side of the grave—Chilya's grave—the cold earth that covered all that remained of my merry, lovely Chilya. "We found this fastened round her waist. Do you wish for it?"

He held out something in his fingers, something brown and repulsive, that dangled from a string.

It was the Dried Head.

I snatched the revolting object from his hand. Furious rage possessed me. Not far away a band of native women were cooking in a stone oven. I went over to them and thrust the Dried Head into the midst of the flames. It burned bravely, turning the fire to a brilliant green. Twice death had followed the wearing of that hideous relic; twice the Witch Doctor's invocation had come true, first on M'bopa, then on my beloved Chilya. Only I had escaped. Now it could work its evil no more. The fire was burning it, purifying it of its evil. The curse of the cannibals was powerless at last.

INDEX

A

Abu Kajah, 186, 187, 188, 197, 199, 200, 213, 214, 226
  death of, 234
Arabs, 165 *et seq.*
  author's meeting with, 169
  daily life of, 183
  food of, 173, 193–194, 203–204
  houses of, 170–172, 182–183
  marriage customs of, 189–190, 198, 199
  religion of, 189
  village of, 167 *et seq.*
Arab traders, 194, 205
Asida, 203

B

Banana Point, 57, 59, 60
Blacks, position of amongst Arabs, 210–211

C

Cæsar (lion), 38, 39, 40, 41, 43, 44, 46
Cannibalism, 85, 93, 94
  different kinds of, 96–97
Cannibals, Lualaba, 67, 82, 126 *et seq.*
Chilya, 185 *et seq.*
  death of, 242–249
  kills Abu Kajah, 234
Chimpanzees, 9–13, 17–19, 28 *et seq.*, 48, 206
  performance of, 33, 34
  training of, 28–32
Circus, 15, 16, 20 *et seq.*, 36
Congo Free State, 60
Congo, River, 57, 59, 61
Cous-cous, 203
Crocodiles, 63, 70, 237
Curse, cannibal, 104–105, 139–140, 180, 223, 250

D

Dance, native, 88
Darfur, 176
Dart, native, 66–67
Doctor, Witch, 68, 69, 70, 71, 75, 76, 84, 85, 89–92, 98, 101, 102–103, 104–106, 236–237
  election of, 76–78, 236–237

Dried Head. *See* Head, Dried.
Drum, African, 83

E

Elephants, fighting period of, 145–146
migrating, 161

F

Falls, Stanley, 60, 62
Fire, making of, 118
Forest, African, 72, 73, 75, 109, 113 *et seq.*, 163 *et seq.*
Fritz, Herr, 41, 43–45

G

Gayzah, 60, 62, 63, 64, 65, 67, 69
death of, 70
Giraffe, 149, 158–159
Gnu, Brindled. *See Wildebeest*
Gorilla, 10, 226, 227
courtship of, 227–229
Grassland, 148–150, 157–162

H

Harems, 189
Head, Dried, 47, 52–54, 55, 101, 102, 103, 105, 106, 111, 124, 136, 180–181, 205, 224–225, 239–240, 250
Hippopotamus, 64, 241
Hunt, start of, 210
Hut, building of, 117–118

J

'Jim,' 51 *et seq.*
death of, 88–92
meeting with author, 51

K

Kasba, 144, 149 157
Kenge. *See* Okapi,

L

Lepers, 178
Lion, 159–161
killing method of, 159–160
Loom, primitive Arab, 203
Lualaba River, 62, 63, 65

M

Marseilles, 14, 50, 57
M'bopa, 76, 110 *et seq.*
death of, 230–233, 236–237

Medicine Man. *See* Witch Doctor
M'fondo, 226

N

Nargileh, 194, 209
Natives, Banyari, 79
Gaboon, 79
Lualaba. *See* Cannibals, Lualaba

O

Okapi, 218–220, 222, 223, 224–226
Orchids, 73, 120

P

Plantains, 112
Point, Banana, 57, 59, 60
Pygmies, 79

R

Religion, African, 131–132
River Congo, 57, 59, 61
Lomami, 132
Lualaba, 62, 63, 65

S

Sacrifice, Human, 135
Sassabies, 158
Sebah, 38 *et seq.*, 106
death of, 43
Sheikh, Arab, 172, 173, 174, 175–179, 180, 193, 195, 196–200, 209
house of, 171–172, 182
Slave-trading, 176, 245
Snails, 148
Springbok, 158
Stanley Falls, 60, 62

T

Telephone, primitive, 121–122

V

Vieux, le, 23, 24–26, 34, 45
Village, Arab, 167 *et seq.*
position of blacks in, 210–211
Village, Native, 79 *et seq.*
different kinds of, 79, 80
clearing ground for, 114
Village, the Deserted, 126, 142, 143, 150–153
Vultures, 160

W

Wildebeest, 158, 159
Witch Doctor, 68, 69, 70, 71, 75, 76, 84, 85, 89–92, 98, 101, 102–103, 104–106, 236–237
election of, 76–78, 236–237

Z

Zebra, 158, 159, 160

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